POCKET ADVENTURES

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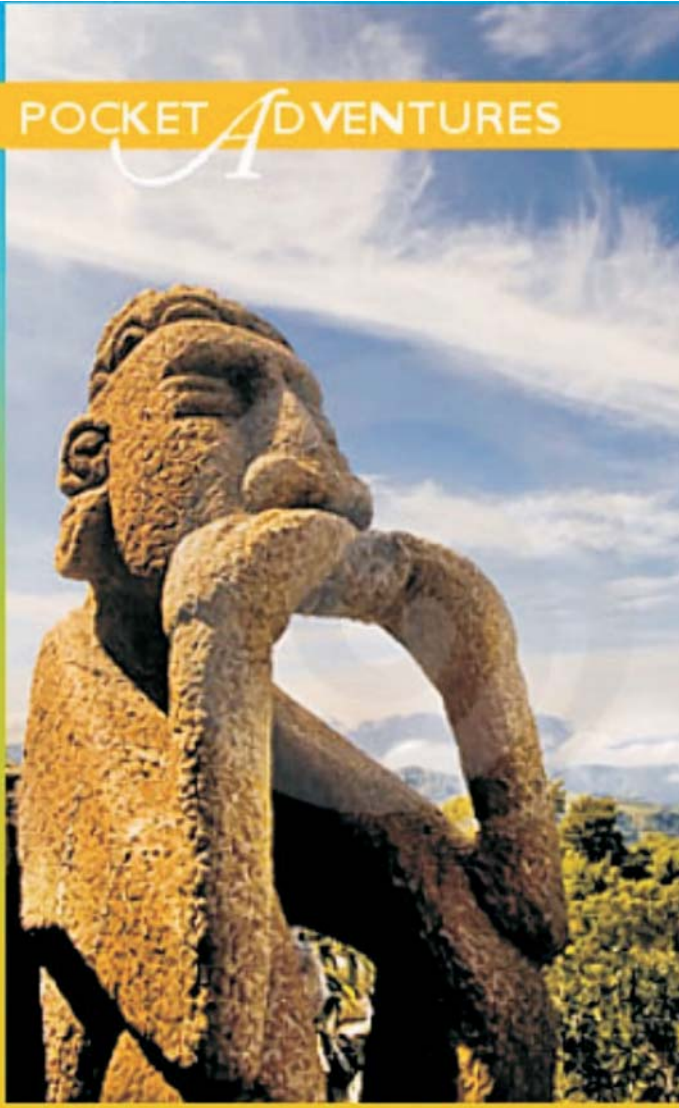

2nd Edition

Bruce & June Conord

COSTA RICA

VISIT…

POCKET ADVENTURES

COSTA RICA

2nd Edition

Bruce & June Conord

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Index by Nancy Wolff & Mary Ellen McGrath

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1 2 3 4

Author Profiles

The Conords have been traveling and writing about their journeys for years. They enjoy adventure and ecological travel, as well as historical and cultural forays in foreign lands. Their other Hunter titles, *Adventure Guide to the Yucatán, Adventure Guide to Costa Rica*, *Cancún, Cozumel & The Riviera Maya Alive!,* and *Pocket Adventures Yucatán* garnered critical acclaim and won several prestigious travel writing and photography awards from the North American Travel Journalists' Assoc.

Bruce went to Rutgers University and has written biographies of John Lennon, Bill Cosby and Cesar Chavez. He has worked as an import manager, teacher, advertising executive, copywriter and publisher's representative. Writing, photography, soccer and travel are his passions.

June grew up in southwest England and went to Plymouth Art College. Whenever she gets near the ocean, she feels happy. Her professional credits include numerous newspaper and magazine articles and stock photography. She has edited, photographed and worked alongside Bruce in many of their joint efforts to eke out a living and travel more. For relaxation, she could happily spend all day on a pebble beach, poking a stick in rock pools and collecting shells.

Their individual work is represented by a stock photography agency and together their photographs of Mexico have been featured at an exhibit in the prestigious New York Arts Club.

Visit their website at www.adventureguides.com.

Acknowledgments

Although Costa Rica is a small country, its diverse geography and plentiful eco-adventure tourism opportunities made writing a well-researched guidebook quite a challenge. Readers who write to us are deeply appreciated, especially ones such as Kathleen Stewart, Cindy Kippley, Carol Fahey, Dina Tanners and Rachelle Burk, who provided new info on the golden toad. Individual parks and attractions made themselves available to us on short notice and we thank them. We are also grateful to all the Ticos and expats who gave freely of their time and made us feel so very welcome wherever we went. We must single out Allan Templeton in Manuel Antonio and Thomas Douglas in San José for particular generosity, and our personal thanks for years of friendship and hospitality go to Hilda Castro and family in Cedros.

Then, of course, our gratitude goes to our editor, Kim André, whose support and encouragement – and fine editing – keeps us on track. Lastly, we would like to thank you, our readers, for choosing this guidebook – it's the highest kind of praise! *Gracias.*

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DEDICATION

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

~ Margaret Mead, American anthropologist

To the men, women, and children around the world who do their best to conserve and protect our precious environment for future generations – theirs is the silent green army; and to them, this book is dedicated.

Introduction

Costa Rica is a magical land known for beautiful scenery and friendly people. Historic political stability and intriguing Latin-American culture attract all kinds of vacationers. But it is the host of natural wonders and ecological diversions that draws most visitors – and adventure opportunities abound.

Whitewater raft through pristine jungles, or bathe in natural hot water springs. Slide through a canopy of trees on a high wire. Visit coffee farms and banana plantations. Sunbathe on beaches of black volcanic or powdery white sand. Watch a nighttime volcano eruption put on a fireworks display of ruby-red hot lava. See endangered giant sea turtles dig nests and lay their eggs. Climb to the top of a high volcano and look down into its crater filled with a turquoise blue lake. Visit one of the many butterfly farms, or stare back at a poisonous snake at a Serpentarium. Surf, snorkel, hike, bike, camp, eat, dance, read a book – Costa Rica offers a smorgasbord of pastimes for your pleasure. We've been many times and find more to do and see each time we visit. Maybe we'll see you there on our next trip!

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How to Use this Book

You know the old saying. If you find fault with our book, please tell us – but if you like it, tell a friend! We have arranged this guide in a way that makes it easy for readers ether to plan an itinerary or get right into the details of specific adventures. Unless you're just going to one area, travel in Costa Rica always involves passing through the

Central Valley. The best way to think of it is as a spoked wheel, with San José as the hub. Costa Rica is small enough to get from coast to coast in one long day of driving, or half an hour in a plane. You can see a lot of the country even if you are based in the capital.

We divided our guide into regions: San José; the Central Valley; the Northwest; the Nicoya Peninsula; Pacifica (the Central Pacific Coast); the Caribbean Coast; and Zona Sur, the Southern Pacific. Each offers its own diverse enjoyments.

We also wrote this *Adventure Pocket Guide* with an ecologically responsible slant. Costa Rica is an environmental paradise – so don't be a tourist, be an eco-tourist.

Flexible travelers can always get a lot out of their vacations, and that's especially true in Costa Rica. Starting in San José and wandering off to find your pleasures can be a great way to go. The main north-south road is the Inter-American Highway, which connects the towns of La Cruz (near the Nicaraguan border) with Canoas (on the border with Panama).

Nearly every major establishment we mention in this guide has e-mail and a website; we've included the web address after the phone number. Those establishments without their own websites are still likely to have e-mail; we've listed only the e-mail in these cases. Because Internet cafés come and go faster than we can type, we haven't bothered to list them. Just ask. There will be one nearby; if not, find a post office – they have computers for use.

If you find things are different than we have suggested in the pages of this book, please let our publisher know or send us an e-mail directly (book@adventureguides.com). The same goes if you've found something good that we didn't include – let us know. Our goal is to make your vacation the best ever!

◆ Prices

Although we made every effort to be as thorough, complete and accurate as possible, things change in Costa Rica – sometimes *muy rapido*. We use a system of dollar-sign symbols to let you know the cost of various accommodations and restaurants.

◆ Very Useful Web Information

There's tons of information available. Make sure you read our *Handy Hints* section on page 95. And, if you plan to rent a car, please read our driving tips on page 78.

There are several sources of Costa Rican information on the web. The government's official site is www.tourism-costarica.com. If you'd like to have a Costa Rica tourism brochure mailed to you, call them at ☎ 800/343-6332. Some good maps can be found for purchase or download at www.mapcr.com.

Other good resources include www.costarica.com, www.therealcostarica.com, www.centralamerica.com and www.bruncas.com. Gay and lesbian travel info can be found at www.gaycostarica.com. For a round- up of hotels, log on to www.hotels.co.cr or the association website, www.costaricanhotels.com. Check bus routes and schedules online at www.costaricabybus.com.

If you want to keep up with news in Costa Rica, look every Friday at www.ticotimes.net and check daily on www.insidecostarica.com and www.amcostarica.com, where you can sign up for daily headlines by e-mail. *La Nacion* newspaper has an English-language site, www.nacion.com/In_ee/english.

For eco-tourism discussions, look to www.planeta.com. Devoted eco-tourists should check out the eco-cultural offerings of Cooperena cooperatives at www.turismoruralcr.com or www.ecotourism.co.cr. The first site is most important for community-based ecological and cultural tourism. Scattered across Costa Rica are rustic rural lodges that provide local guides, typical family food, eco-tourism activities and cultural interchange with local communities. Sports folk can check out www.costaricaoutdoors.com.

Locally run websites with accommodations and general information include www.monteverdeinfo.com and www.monteverde-online.com (Monteverde), www.maqbeach.com (Manuel Antonio & Quepos), plus Pacific coast beach destinations: www.nosara.com, www.samarabeach.com, and www.tamarindo.com. For the Osa Peninsula and southern part of the country from Dominical to Panama, look to the Pacific region's www.osamap.com, or on the southern Caribbean coast, www.greencoast.com, www.puertoviejo.net and www.puertoviejoweb.com (Puerto Viejo). Surfers can check www.crsurf.com in Dominical. Sports and cultural info are available at www.internet.co.cr.

◆ We Love To Get Mail!

Hunter Publishing makes every effort to ensure that its travel guides are the most current sources of information available to travelers. If you have any information that you feel should be included in the

next edition of this guide, please write to us at 130 Campus Drive, Edison, NJ 08818, or send an e-mail to kim@hunterpublishing.com.

Feel free to include your opinion or experiences of the places you've visited, as well as price updates and suggestions for ways in which we could improve this book for future readers. If you'd like to contact the authors directly, e-mail them at book@adventure guides.com.

Costa Rica At A Glance

WHEN TO VISIT: The high season in Costa Rica, December through April, is the dry season. But anymore, Costa Rica is so popular that even during the rainy season (our favorite) there are a lot of tourists. Secondary roads can become rutted during those months, and four-wheel-drive vehicles are strongly recommended.

MONEY: Costa Rican currency is the colon (co-LOAN), named after Christopher Columbus. It floats daily against the dollar and can be exchanged at banks and change booths. American dollars and major credit cards are acceptable almost everywhere, except in small business establishments or in remote locations. ATMs (*Cajeros Automaticos*) are available in most cities and towns with bank offices.

PEOPLE: The population of Costa Rica was 4.13 million as of July 2007, which includes 40,000 native people who belong to eight different cultural groups. The official language is Spanish, but many of the people speak some English, a required course in all schools. Costa Ricans are affectionately known as *Ticos* (TEA-coes) – and you would be hard pressed to find a more friendly and welcoming culture.

RELIGION: Catholicism is the dominant religion, as it is in most of Latin America. Consequently, nearly all major holidays are religious in nature. The government and popular culture is secular, though still conservative.

MAJOR CITIES: San José, population one million plus, is the capital and cultural heart of Costa Rica. Other major cities (by population) are: Alajuela, Cartago, Heredia, Liberia, Limón and Puntarenas.

WEATHER: Costa Rica is a tropical country with two seasons – dry and wet. The rainy season, which lasts from May to November, usu-

ally sees sunny mornings, with rain showers in late afternoon and evening. Overall, the climate is tropical, with an average temperature of 72°F (22°C). It can be much hotter along the coastal areas of the country, and cooler in the mountains.

EMERGENCIES: Dial 911.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS: Canadians and North Americans are not required to have a visa and may visit Costa Rica for a maximum of 90 days without one. To enter the country you must have a valid passport.

ELECTRICITY: The voltage throughout the country is 110, the same as in North America. However, three-prong outlets are scarce, so bring along an adapter if you need one.

TIME ZONE: Costa Rica is on Central Standard Time, six hours behind Greenwich Mean Time and one hour behind EST in the States

HEALTH: No shots are required, but we always suggest having a Hepatitis A shot as a precaution. The water in the major cities of Costa Rica is safe and most hotels and restaurants offer purified tap water. You might prefer to drink bottled water (*agua purificada*) or seltzer (*agua mineral*) to be sure. Costa Rica has excellent, low-cost medical care and well-qualified practitioners. Many North Americans come to Costa Rica for cosmetic surgery or dental work (we did).

SAFETY & CRIME: Costa Rica is a safe destination for 99% of its tourists, but it's always a good idea to exercise caution whenever one travels. In general, the country has a low crime rate, but in recent years there have been increasing instances of tourists and expatriates being robbed, as well as several highly publicized murders. Additionally, most eco-adventures involve some sort of danger, so be sure to use less testosterone and more common sense when deciding on your level of participation in these activities.

THINGS TO BUY: Choose from coffee and coffee-related products, reproduction pre-Columbian jewelry, craftily carved wooden boxes, attractive Chorotegan pottery, leather goods, hand-painted art, guitars or painted miniature oxcarts.

DRIVING/CAR RENTAL: Rental cars are expensive, but are a good way to see Costa Rica outside of San José. You should buy all the insurance offered – and then some. Drivers in Costa Rica are maniacs – worse than Bostonians – and, for a non-confrontational

people, very aggressive behind the wheel. Drive very cautiously as road conditions are unpredictable. Think mass transit – buses are a good alternative and very reasonably priced.

Top 20 Spots

Our list of "Top 20 Things to Do or See" is a guide to the best that Costa Rica has to offer. It's not in any order, nor does it cover anywhere near all of the country's attractions. But it should give you some food for thought in planning your vacation.

Arenal (Matthias Prinke)

1. ARENAL VOLCANO: Famous for its nighttime lava fireworks, Arenal Volcano towers above a lovely lake of the same name. The area has plenty of natural activities, eco-adventures, and the lake is particularly popular with fishermen and windsurfers. The thermal springs at the base of the mountain offer a warm dip. The volcano itself rumbles frequently and, if not socked in by clouds, is very impressive – and just a tad exciting. See page 189.

2. MONTEVERDE: The 10,526-hectare/26,000-acre Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve, nestled in moisture-filled hanging clouds, provides a home to thousands of species of plants, animals and insects. It offers a unique opportunity to experience, up close, the

beauty of nature unspoiled – the reason we all come to Costa Rica. See page 207.

3. MANUEL ANTONIO: This is prime real estate. Manuel Antonio National Park has three white sandy connecting beaches and a forest filled with a variety of monkeys. It is country's the most popular park and a *de-rigueur* destination. See page 292.

4. TORTUGUERO: Bordered by the Caribbean Sea, Tortuguero National Park contains an incredible network of navigable canals, and boats are the only way transportation. The park's 37 km/23 miles of beaches are protected nesting grounds for the green sea turtle. In season (July to October), you can accompany a guide to the beaches at night and watch turtles lay their eggs. See page 342.

5. CANOPY TOURS: Most of the rainforest's life dwells in the canopy, high above ground. Consequently, there are a large number of

"canopy tours" offered. Most are geared to having a wild ride rather than studying wildlife – but they are a lot of fun!

6. WHITEWATER RAFTING: Costa Rica is famous for its white-water river raft trips through the rain forest. Rafting is one of the best ways to have a day's adventure. You can even opt for an overnight trip with a stay in a riverside lodge deep in the rain forest. Our favorite ride is on the Pacuare River (see page 117), through primary and secondary forests and an impressively deep gorge. Exciting, exhilarating, and intoxicating. Other regional rivers also offer challenging rides.

7. LANKESTER GARDENS: Wander along the 17 km/10.6 miles of trails that lead throughout the Lankester Gardens outside of Cartago. Among colorful open garden beds and a cool shady forest, enjoy countless varieties of orchids, bromeliads, cacti and palms. See page 155.

Quetzal (Steve Bird)

8. IN SEARCH OF THE QUETZAL: Everyone heads to Monteverde to look for the quetzal, the colorful native bird that is an enduring symbol of freedom. If you're going north, by all means keep an eye out. But we think the best chance to find the elusive quetzal is off the Inter-American Highway that connects San Isidro and Cartago. This highway crosses Costa Rica's highest mountains along the Cerro de la Muerte and there are several lodges here that cater to birdwatchers. The best time for a sighting is the nesting season for these magnificent birds is March through May.

9. POAS VOLCANO: A long, panoramic, twisting road wends its way up the mountainside to Poás Volcano. Its crater, partially filled with turquoise water, is said to be the second-largest active volcano crater in the world. Not to be missed. See page 173.

10. IRAZU VOLCANO: The 11,260-foot-tall Irazú Volcano is the highest in Costa Rica and still considered active, even though its last major eruption was on March 19, 1963, the day that President John F. Kennedy arrived in Costa Rica. Today, a few puffs of steam and smoke are the most activity you're likely to see. To get here you'll cross a wide expanse of dark gray barren land resembling a moonscape. At the rim, the sight of the crater filled with pea-green sulfur-laden water – surrounded by a rugged rocky cliff face – leaves one breathless. See page 154.

11. CORCOVADO/OSA: This national park is the largest tract of virgin rain forest in Costa Rica and covers more than half of the Osa Peninsula. Famous for its scarlet macaws and a multitude of other wildlife, it is a colorful must-see for adventure naturalists. See page 376.

Corcovado coast

12. CAHUITA & PUERTO VIEJO: The southern Atlantic beach towns of Cahuita and Puerto Viejo are laid back and friendly, a place to rest and rejuvenate during the day – and the hot spot for dancing at night. See pages 354-364.

13. NATIONAL THEATER & GOLD MUSEUM: The heart of San José is the imposing National Theater (see page 102). The 1,000-seat venue offers performances by the world's most famous artists. Don't miss seeing its fabulous gold gilt interior and be sure to have afternoon tea in the theater's café. The Gold Museum (page 105) is below the Plaza de la Cultura, to the rear of the theater. A permanent display of more than 2,000 pre-Columbian gold artifacts and temporary art exhibits make for a rich experience.

14. JADE MUSEUM: Eye-popping pre-Columbian jade, gold and stone art are featured at the Jade Museum, located on the ground floor of the INS building in San José. See page 106.

15. BUTTERFLY FARM & INSECT MUSEUM: The Butterfly Farm near Alajuela is Latin America's first and largest exporter of farm-

raised butterflies. There are many smaller butterfly farm imitators, but one that's impossible to imitate is Dr. Richard Whitten's Jewels of the Rainforest Exhibit, headquartered at Selvatura park in Monteverde (page 214). An important biological attraction is InBio Parque (page 116), located in a suburb of San José. It is a private project to categorize Costa Rica's diverse insect and plant life, as well as educate and entertain visitors.

16. RINCON DE LA VIEJA: This park surrounds the flanks of the Rincón de la Vieja Volcano and its active crater. Many excellent hiking trails traverse this diverse landscape with its hot springs, geysers, mud pots, waterfalls, volcanic craters and a lake. Hard to get to, but a fascinating place. See page 226.

17. SARCHI & COFFEE TOWNS: If you like to shop, Sarchí is your town. Filled with handicraft stores and small factories, it is best known for its colorfully hand-painted Costa Rican oxcarts (*carretas*), which can be purchased in all sizes (and shipped home). Enjoy an oxcart painting demonstration at the Plaza de la Artesania shopping mall, then dine at one of the many restaurants. When you're shopped out, take a short side trip to nearby Zarcero. In the center of town you'll enjoy the whimsical and photogenic topiary featuring animal figures from sculpted cypress. See pages 176-188.

18. WATER, WATER, EVERYWHERE: A plethora of beaches await you on the Caribbean and Pacific coasts of Costa Rica. They come in a variety of colors with sands that run from white to black and textures ranging from powder soft to coarse and gritty.

19. NATURE LODGES: If you're looking for a unique experience that your cruise ship friends couldn't imagine, spend at least a night in one of the many ecological nature lodges that offer rustic accommodations.

20. FISHING: A growing number of qualified operators offer competitive, world-class sport-fishing charters on both coasts. In the Pacific, marlin, sailfish, tuna and dorado lure the enthusiastic angler. In the turquoise waters of the Caribbean, from mouth of the Barra del Colorado, tarpon and snook are yours for the catching (and releasing).

Suggested Destinations

Our first recommendation is not to cram too much into one trip. It's better to come back again. If you are exploring different regions,

think in terms of an itinerary from San José that touches what you're interested in and loops back in time for your departure. Because Costa Rica is small, you can easily combine several areas and attractions in a one-week stay. If this is your first time here, you might want to pick just one or two areas and base yourself out of them. Each region covered offers adventure travel, recreational vacation and eco-tourism opportunities.

◆ San José & Central Valley

The metropolitan area of San José, Escazú, Cartago and Heredia can fill more time than you have. It offers museums, shopping, nature and culture, as well as day-trips to nearby attractions such as the volcanoes, whitewater rafting, canopy tours and coffee plantations. San José is a big city and is fun for those who like what cities offer, but less metropolitan-oriented visitors might prefer to stay in the suburbs or nearby towns.

◆ Manuel Antonio & Central Pacific

Manuel Antonio National Park is on the Pacific coast, about three or four hours overland from San José. It's the most-visited of Costa Rica's natural reserves. Besides the natural beauty and eco-tourism opportunities you'll find there, the drive itself is spectacular. This trip could include a drive back from Dominical along the Cerro de la Muerte, a twisting part of the Inter-American Highway that rises above the clouds.

◆ Nicoya/Guanacaste

A new airport in Liberia has opened up the area to even more tourism as people come to visit the fabulous beaches that stretch down from the Nicaraguan border to the tip of the Nicoya Peninsula. Some of the country's most attractive beaches are located along this coast, and surfers, sun-worshippers and swimmers gravitate here.

◆ Arenal/Monteverde

Although they stand almost back-to-back, active Arenal Volcano, with its large, windy lake, and the Monteverde Cloud Forest, maintained in part by the original Quaker community that founded it, are hours apart by car. Arenal offers hot springs, lava flows, a trendy

town (La Fortuna), plus the thrill of real danger. Monteverde, which has its own hip town (Santa Elena), is ethereal when clouds shroud the forest's nature walks.

◆ Tortuguero

The remote corner of northeastern Costa Rica is famous for its deep-sea fishing and the Tortuguero canals, a complex of inland rivers that criss-cross the mangrove forests of the region. Here, on the sandy Caribbean beaches, endangered turtles come to nest. Although some companies now offer day-trips from San José, we recommend at least one overnight in the area.

Tortuguero

◆ Atlantic Caribbean

The atmosphere from Limón to Cahuita and Puerto Viejo is closer to that of a Caribbean island than to the hustle and bustle of the Central Valley. That's partly because it looks more Caribbean – beaches are lined with palms – but mostly because of the Afro-Caribbean culture of the workers who settled the area 150 years ago. Loose and lovely.

◆ Osa Peninsula

The south and southwest corner of Costa Rica contains the largest tracts of unspoiled virgin rainforest. Corcovado National Park's rich expanse of primary forest covers most of the Osa Peninsula and features some wonderful nature lodges.

Surfing Safaris

Long known as a surfer's paradise – for more reasons than just waves – Costa Rica's beaches continue to attract foreign surfers who come for tournaments or just for fun. Both coasts have exceptional curls. Check out www.crsurf.com for the latest updates.

◆ North Pacific Coast

PLAYA NARANJO: Also known as Witch's Rock, Playa Naranjo features one of the most famous breaks in Costa Rica with near-perfect tubular waves. Witch's Rock was made famous in the film *Endless Summer.* There are no facilities here – you have to camp or day trip in. Just to the south of Witch's Rock Ollie's Point, named after Lt. Col. Oliver North. It's nice to know that something good has come from Ollie's misdeeds – one of the two cargo planes flown out of here has become a restaurant at Costa Verde in Manuel Antonio. (The other one was shot down over Nicaragua, which revealed the US involvement in the Iran-Contra scandal.)

Playa Tamarindo

PLAYA TAMARINDO: Easy to get to and very popular. The three main breaks are Pico Pequeño, a rocky point in front of the Hotel Tamarindo; El Estero, a good river-mouth break; and Henry's

Surfing Safari

1. Manzanillo
2. Puerto Viejo
3. Black Beach
4. Westfalia
5. Playa Bonita Point
6. Portete
7. Isla Uvita
8. North Caribbean Coast
9. Potrero Grande
10. Playa Naranjo
11. Playa Grande
12. Playa Tamarindo
13. Langosta
14. Avellanas
15. Playa Negra
16. Nosara Beach
17. Playa Coyote
18. Manzanillo
19. Malpais
20. Boca Barranca
21. Puerto Caldera
22. Playa Tivives & Valor
23. Playa Escondida
24. Playa Jacó
25. Roca Loca
26. Playa Hermosa
27. Esterillos Este
28. Esterillos Oeste
29. Bejuco
30. Boca Damas
31. Quepos
32. Playita
33. Playa El Ray
34. Playa Dominical
35. Drake's Bay
36. Pavones
37. Matapalo
38. Punta Burica

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Point, a rocky break in front of the Zullymar Restaurant. Each August, Tamarindo hosts a season-end pro-am competition with a big purse

AVELLANAS: The Guanacasteco break features very hollow left and right breaks, 10 km/6.2 miles south of Tamarindo. Nearby Nosara is a nice little seaside town with long right and left beach breaks.

PLAYA COYOTE, MANZANILLO, SANTA TERESA & MALPAIS: These somewhat remote beach breaks, with several points, are increasingly popular for their speed and consistency.

◆ Central Pacific Coast

BOCA BARRANCA: The closest surf beach to San José, this is a river mouth with excellent access. Two km/1.2 miles south is Puerto Caldera, with Jetty Break, a good left near a sea wall.

JACÓ: Jacó can get some rough surf and closes out when it is over five feet. Inconsistent good beach break. South of Jacó is Playa Hermosa and a few other nearby spots with strong beach breaks and good waveforms. Waves are best on rising tides

QUEPOS & MANUEL ANTONIO: A small left point is at the river mouth near the city. Next to the park itself there are left and right beach breaks that offer good shape with larger swells.

◆ Southern Pacific Coast

DOMINICAL: Very strong beach breaks with good lefts and rights. Windy, warm and popular, but frequently has riptides.

DRAKE BAY & OSA: Located next to the beautiful Corcovado National Park and accessible only by boat, this area features powerful waves and swells.

PAVONES: Considered one of the world's longest left points, Pavones' waves have an international reputation for good shape and speed. Get there by boat or bus, bring camping equipment or stay in rustic *cabinas*. Nearby are a series of world-class rights.

◆ Caribbean Coast

TORTUGUERO: Besides the area's fishing, turtle watching and natural canals, the Tortuguero beaches feature decent break surf. The best is near Puerto Moín, 15 km/9.3 miles north of Playa Bonita.

PLAYA BONITA: Its point/reef, left break has been described as "thick, powerful and dangerous." Five km/3.1 miles north of Limón.

ISLA UVITA: A little island off Limón, Uvita is the spot where Columbus first anchored in Costa Rica. It has a good, but dangerous, left break.

CAHUITA: The park has waves year-round. Ask about Black Beach Cahuita, a little-known spot with an excellent beach break.

PUERTO VIEJO: The shallow reef here makes the voluminous deep-water wave that passes over it very big and tubular. This juicy and powerful big wave is known as the Salsa Brava. Good surfers only.

MANZANILLO: The last surf beach before the Panama border, Manzanillo features a fast beach break.

Windsurfing (Manuel González Olaechea y Franco)

Wild Windsurfing

Windsurfers are a unique breed, a hybrid breed of surfers and sailors. Although there are a few ocean areas for windsurfing (best

in the Pacific northwest and Golfo Dulce), Arenal Lake offers ideal inland windsurfing conditions with 55-70 knot winds!

Fantastic Fishing

Costa Rica's rich waters boast giant marlin, super sailfish, vigorous tarpon, record-class snook and more than a dozen hard-hitting freshwater species. Even deep-sea fly-fishing nets a record number of fish.

THE FISH CALENDAR

Here are some of the fish and their seasons, listed geographically. Keep in mind, though, fish don't use calendars.

NORTH PACIFIC WATERS

Marlin: Caught all year; peak periods are November to early March and August and September.

Sailfish: Caught year-round; peak time is May through August.

Tuna: Available year-round, peaking between August and October. Several fish between 200 and 400 lbs caught annually.

In addition, there are plenty of dorado, wahoo and roosterfish.

CENTRAL PACIFIC WATERS

Marlin: Caught all year, but October and shoulder months are best.

Sailfish: The middle of December to the end of April is best rated, but sometimes October has big schools.

Tuna: All year; peak months are June through September. A dozen or more 200-lb-plus fish are taken every year.

Snook: The rainy season seems to be best; a world record Pacific black snook was caught near Río Naranjo.

SOUTH PACIFIC WATERS

The Golfito area is famous for its big roosterfish year-round.

Marlin: August through December is peak.

Sailfish: December to the end of March is best, then again in August and September.

Tuna: August through March is the best time for the 100 pounders, but fish of up to 30 lbs are caught year-round.

Snook: The rainy season seems to be best; a world record Pacific black snook was caught near Río Naranjo.

THE FISH CALENDAR

CARIBBEAN WATERS

Tarpon: Traditionally these fish are caught most often during the dry season, December through May.

Snook & Fat Snook: Snook catches generally peak March through May, September and November. Fat snook (Calba) become plentiful November through January.

Billfish: Out in the deep blue water are Atlantic blue marlin and Atlantic sailfish. Most are caught between February and September.

Also caught in great numbers here are wahoo, dorado, tripletail, kingfish, Spanish and cero mackerel, jack crevalle and barracuda.

Gay & Lesbian Travel

Despite Costa Rica's conservative Catholic sensibilities, Ticos' reputation for tolerance and acceptance has made it a popular destination for gay and lesbian travelers. But it's a little like the "don't-ask, don't-tell" policies of the US military – gays and lesbians are welcomed as long as they do not blatantly advertise their sexuality. Overt public displays of affection by same-sex partners make many Ticos uncomfortable, especially in rural areas. To a lesser degree, the same can be said of public displays of affection between heterosexual couples. Discretion is the key to having a good time.

Despite turning away a busload of gay partygoers a few years ago, the Manuel Antonio area attracts a large number of both foreign and local homosexuals. All M.A. hotels welcome same-sex partners but we also mention exclusively gay accommodations.

For tips and complete information about gay travel, get in touch with La Asociación Triángulo Rosa *(☎ 506/2258-0214, atrirosa@racsa.co.cr)*, a gay rights organization, or check out the English- and Spanish-language website *(www.gaycostarica.com)*. Lesbians can check out the Spanish-language website www.mujerymujer.com. A full-service travel agency that specializes in gay and lesbian travel in Costa Rica is Tiquicia Travel in Barrio Amón (*Calle 3 between Avenidas 7-9, ☎ 506/2256-6429, www.tiquiciatravel.com*).

In San José, several hotels go out of their way to welcome gay and lesbian travelers, like Hotel Kekoldi *(Av 9 & Calle 3, ☎ 506/2223-3244, www.kekoldi.com)* a gay-friendly hotel that features wonderful painted murals on the walls and continental breakfast. This big green Caribbean-style Victorian property sits on a busy corner in a

centrally located neighborhood. Kekoldi is a Bribri word that means "tree of water."

Colours *(150 meters west of Farmacia Rohrmoser; US ☎ 800/277-4825, CR 506/2296-1880, www.colours.net; pool, TV, restaurant & bar, breakfast included)* is a gay guest home in the Rohrmoser neighborhood of San José. Popular center of social and group tourism activities.

Travel Essentials

So you're off to Costa Rica for a vacation adventure. Good choice. You'll be welcomed by friendly people and offered a chance to get to know them and their beautiful country – Ticos are justifiably proud of it. While you are there, remember to respect both them and the environment. After all, you may be on vacation, but they live there.

INFORMATION SOURCES

To get general information and brochures about Costa Rica, call the Tourism Hotline *(☎ 800/343-6332)*. In-country, ☎ 800-TOURISM for help in English. On-line information is available from the Tourist Board (ICT, Instituto Costarricense de Turismo) at www.visitcostarica.com, and a host of commercial sites (see page 395).

◆ Entry Requirements

For stays of up to 90 days, Americans and Canadians need proof of citizenship, such as a passport or certified birth certificate, and a photo ID. Americans should be using passports now. Europeans and residents of South American countries must have a current passport. If your passport expires within six months of your departure date, it's better to get a new one as some airlines may prevent you from boarding due to immigration laws. No visas or prophylactic inoculations are required.

> AUTHOR TIP: *Lock your passport in the hotel safe and carry a photocopy (ask your hotel to do it). It's a safe way to have an ID.*

If you know you'll need an extended visa before you go, or need more information, contact the Costa Rica embassy: in Canada, 135 York Street, Suite 208, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 5T4, ☎ 613/562-2855; in the UK, 14 Lancaster Gate, London W2 3L, ☎ 0171- 706-8844; and in the US at 2114 S Street NW, Washington, DC 20008, ☎ 202/324-2945, www.costarica-embassy.org. Consulates are in New York (☎ 212/509-3066), Los Angeles (☎ 213/380-6031), Chicago (☎ 312/263-2772), Houston (☎ 713/266-0484), Miami (☎ 305/871-7485), Atlanta (☎ 770/951-7025), New Orleans (☎ 504/581-6800) and Denver (☎ 303/696-8211).

Passports

US passport application forms can be obtained at major post offices, courthouses or passport offices in larger metropolitan areas. Or you can download a form from the State Department at http://travel.state.gov. Apply three months before your trip. The site offers tons of information, including a very useful Consular Information Sheet that contains special safety or health alerts.

Canadians can apply at the Central Passport Office in Ottawa, ☎ 800/567-6868. For Brits it's the London Passport Office, ☎ 0171-271-3000.

◆ Measurements, Dates & Time

Costa Rica remains on Central Standard Time year-round. Weights, measures and temperatures are metric. Gasoline is sold by the liter and distances are measured by kilometers. Dates are expressed with the day first, followed by the month. For example,

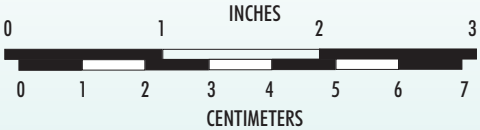
Christmas Day is written 25/12. Often, hours are posted in a 24-hour format. Two in the afternoon is 14:00, 10 at night is 22:00.

Going Metric

GENERAL MEASUREMENTS

To make your travels a little easier, we have provided the following chart that shows metric equivalents for the measurements you are familiar with.

1 kilometer	=	.6124 miles
1 mile	=	1.6093 kilometers
1 foot	=	.304 meters
1 inch	=	2.54 centimeters
1 square mile	=	2.59 square kilometers
1 pound	=	.4536 kilograms
1 ounce	=	28.35 grams
1 imperial gallon	=	4.5459 liters
1 US gallon	=	3.7854 liters
1 quart	=	.94635 liters



TEMPERATURES

For Farenheit: Multiply centigrade figure by 1.8 and add 32
For Centigrade: Subtract 32 from Farenheit figure and divide by 1.8.

Centigrade		Farenheit
40°	=	104°
35°	=	95°
30°	=	86°
25°	=	77°
20°	=	64°
15°	=	59°
10°	=	50°

◆ What to Take

Everyone does it. It starts with "what if?" – "What if it rains?" "What if it's cold?" "What if we go out to a fancy place?" "What if you spill ketchup on your shirt and my dress gets caught in a taxi door?" Then we wind up packing too much.

SHUTTER BUGS: *Get your film camera fixed or buy a new one at Cameras Equipos (☎ 506/2224-4186, Nikon Pentax, Mamiya), Taller de Equipos Foto- graficos (☎ 506/2233-0176, Canon) or Tecfot SA (☎ 506/2222-0996, Minolta, Olympus, Fuji). All are located in San José.*

Try to take no more than five or six days' worth of clothes, no matter how long your trip. In big towns and small, you'll find a number of self-service and drop-off laundromats (*lavanderías* – la-ban-der-IAS) that will clean and fold your clothing for you.

AUTHOR TIP: *Take older clothes that you won't miss if you stain them or the laundry fades or shrinks them. You can always buy more there. Leave any open toiletries and unwanted clothes in Costa Rica.*

PACKING LIST

CLOTHING

- ❒ Comfortable walking shoes with non-skid soles
- ❒ several pairs of cotton socks
- ❒ underwear
- ❒ sandals
- ❒ one/two pair no-iron slacks (jeans are too heavy).
- ❒ one/two pair shorts
- ❒ women: two modest lightweight dresses or skirts
- ❒ two shirts or blouses
- ❒ three T-shirts
- ❒ swimsuit (carry it with you everywhere)
- ❒ sleepwear
- ❒ light cotton sweater or sport jacket and/or
- ❒ water-resistant windbreaker
- ❒ hat and sunglasses
- ❒ fanny pack and money belt
- ❒ umbrella
- ❒ flip flops for use on slippery bathroom floors

TOILETRIES

- ❒ shampoo
- ❒ toothbrush and toothpaste
- ❒ prescription medicine
- ❒ comb/brush
- ❒ women: make-up as desired
- ❒ personal hygiene products
- ❒ sunscreen, UVA/UVB protection SPF 30+ (sunscreen takes 30 minutes to become effective after application)
- ❒ good insect repellent, a must for back country travel
- ❒ aloe gel for sunburn
- ❒ Imodium AD and aspirin
- ❒ triple antibiotic cream
- ❒ Band-Aids
- ❒ facecloth
- ❒ *If you're roughing it, also bring*
- ❒ bar soap
- ❒ hand towel
- ❒ toilet paper
- ❒ Small sink stop

OTHER ITEMS

- ❒ resealable plastic freezer bags (many uses)
- ❒ antiseptic towelettes
- ❒ handheld calculator
- ❒ small flashlight
- ❒ small penknife (pack in baggage to be checked)
- ❒ notebook and two pens
- ❒ sun shield (stick-on dark plastic or pop-open type if renting a car)
- ❒ camera, film and extra camera batteries
- ❒ Spanish-English dictionary or phrasebook
- ❒ sports watch
- ❒ earplugs
- ❒ passport, ID, driver's license
- ❒ paperback novel (exchangeable at many hotels)
- ❒ sewing kit with small scissors (packed in baggage being checked)
- ❒ laundry bag
- ❒ address book
- ❒ credit cards and an ATM card
- ❒ phone card
- ❒ this book (*very important*)

◆ Customs & Immigration

Rules on the possession of drugs or firearms are fairly simple – don't have any, period. Drug possession penalties in Costa Rica include prison terms and the US embassy can do little to help. It's just not worth it. You may find marijuana treated lightly, especially in beach towns along both coasts, but don't be convinced that if you're caught nothing will happen.

When you arrive at the newly remodeled Juan Santamaría airport, the Customs check requires you to push a button in a red light/green light system. If the light goes red, they look in your luggage.

US residents may not bring Cuban cigars back into the States. Archeological artifacts or items made from endangered species are strictly forbidden.

◆ Way to Go

Flying to Costa Rica

Most visitors arrive by plane into San José's Juan Santamaría International Airport, 20 minutes from downtown San José. A whole flock of airlines from around the world service Costa Rica, including one of our favorites US Airways *(☎ 800/622-1015, www.usairways.com)*; Continental *(☎ 800/525-0280, www.continental.com)*, with twice daily flights from Houston and one from Newark; American *(☎ 800/433-7300, www.aa.com)* from Miami and Dallas; Delta *(☎ 800/221-1212, www.delta-air.com*) with links from Atlanta; United *(☎ 800/241-6522, www.united.com)* connects in Mexico City or Guatemala from Chicago, LA and DC; and LACSA *(☎ 800/535-8780, www.grupotaca.com)*. LASCA was formerly the national airline of Costa Rica.

Both charters and scheduled airlines are now flying to Liberia's new international airport, making it convenient if you're going directly to Guanacaste or Nicoya beaches.

Recommended Operators

Any good US travel agent can make advance arrangements with a number of reputable tour wholesalers such as Tico-owned Nature Tours *(☎ 800/444-3990, www.naturetoursinc.com)*, who have many years experience in Costa Rica. You might even try contacting them directly – ask for Carlos or Marinela. They're very knowl-

edgeable and have great prices. In addition, several good tour companies in the States can make all or many of your arrangements for you. Expert Costa Rica tours can be made with Holbrook Travel *(☎ 800/451-7111, www.holbrooktravel.com)*, which owns several properties in Costa Rica and has a vested interest in sustainable tourism. They are an excellent agency with a good track record. Other operators are Costa Rica Experts *(☎ 800/827-9046, www.costaricaexperts.com)*; Costa Rica Connection *(☎ 800/345-7422, www.crconnect.com)*; Tropical Travel *(☎ 800/451-8017, www.tropicaltravel.com)*; and Rico Tours *(☎ 800/280-7426, www.ricotours.com)*. All specialize in Costa Rica.

Costa Rica Trekking *(☎ 506/2771-4582, www.chirripo.com)* has professional guides that run three organized bike treks in the Talamance Range, including one in Chirripó.

Also see the section on *Local Adventures, Tours & Day-Trips* in San José (page 112) for local Costa Rican-based tour operators and agencies who can arrange your entire vacation or just day-trips and activities. Wheelchair-bound travelers can contact Monic Chabot at IIDC (see *Travelers with Disabilities* on page 90).

◆ Coming & Going

Arriving

Unless your hotel is picking you up at the airport, the main choice of transportation upon arrival in Costa Rica is by taxi. One-way taxi tickets are sold at the airport at a fixed price of around US $20.

The less common choice of transport directly to downtown is by public bus, which you can catch across from the airport entrance. Ask the driver to be sure the bus you're on is heading for San José. It drops you downtown across from the Parque Merced, Av 2 and Calle 12. The bus isn't a good choice if you're carrying a lot of luggage.

There are numerous car rental desks at the airport; their shuttle will take you to your auto. If you plan to explore only around San José, consider that a car is a liability in the traffic and parking is hard to find. Public buses or taxis are the way to go.

Leaving

If airport transfers aren't included in your hotel price, it's most convenient to take a taxi to the airport for your departure. Agree on the price before you leave.

From downtown, a public bus to Alajuela drops passengers with luggage at the airport. The bus terminal is located on Av 2 and Calle 12, across from Parque Merced. Service is very frequent – every five minutes or so – and takes a half-hour or less, except rush hour.

Don't forget to leave yourself enough money to pay the departure tax, about US $30 per person. Flight reconfirmation and reservation phone numbers in San José are: Continental *(☎ 506/2296-4911)*, American *(☎ 506/2257-1266)*, Delta *(☎ 506/2257-3346)*, LACSA, *(☎ 506/2296-0909*), United *(☎ 506/2220-4844)* and US Airways *(☎ 506/2520-0507).*

The Land Between the Oceans

The country known as Costa Rica – Spanish for "Rich Coast" – is part of a thin isthmus land bridge that joins the large continents of North and South America. It has two distinct coastlines: the Atlantic (or Caribbean) coast, and the long Pacific shore.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Geography 27
- Environment 31
- Flora 39
- Fauna 45

The Pacific coastline wiggles and stretches 1,016 km (631 miles) around three peninsulas – Burlya, Nicoya and Osa – and in the process forms two significant gulfs, Golfo de Nicoya and Golfo Dulce. Although it has a narrow landmass – little more than 300 km (200 miles) at its widest – a series of rugged *cordilleras* (mountain ranges) part its length and form the great Continental Divide. High mountain ranges separate the climate between east and west coasts.

Geography

Bordered to the north by Nicaragua and to the south by Panama, Costa Rica is a little smaller than the state of West Virginia (51,100 square km or 19,730 square miles). More than half of the country's 3.6 million inhabitants live in the Central Valley, or *Meseta Central*. The volcanic soil and temperate climate make this region the country's agricultural breadbasket. The capital of San José lies nestled in this 1,178-meter/3,875-foot hollow, surrounded by mountain peaks.

Costa Rica is divided into seven geo-political provinces: Guanacaste and Alajuela make up the country's northwest corner; Puntarenas hugs most of the Pacific shore; San José and Cartago form the heartland; Heredia runs north from San José to the Nicaraguan border; and Limón occupies the entire Atlantic coastline, sharing the southern half of the country with Puntarenas.

Of the four major mountain ranges that form Costa Rica's spine, the oldest and tallest is the Cordillera de Talamanca, in the southern half of the country. Because of its non-volcanic origin, it boasts 16 distinct summits that exceed 3,000 meters (9,868 feet), including Chirripó, the tallest. The northern mountain ranges are the Cordillera de Guanacaste and the smaller Cordillera de Tilarán. The Tilarán range abuts the Cordillera Volcánica Central that surrounds San José in the middle of the country.

There are two very different lowlands to either side of these four mountain ranges. Low-lying mangrove marshes, rivers, natural canals and soft sandy shore mark the 212-km (133-mile) Atlantic coastline. The uneven Pacific coastline features a rocky base, with dramatic bluffs and hidden beaches.

◆ Rivers

When clouds from the onshore winds reach the cooler elevations of the highlands, they release their moisture as rain – lots of rain. Numerous rivers, large and small, drain the water either east or west, back to the sea. Of course, the ones that attract the most attention are the rafting rivers that have made Costa Rica famous. There are Class III-IV+ rapids on the Sarapiquí, Parrita, Pascua (V), Peñas Blancas, Toro, Reventazón and, our all-time favorite, the Pacuare.

◆ Beaches

The beaches (*playas*, pronounced PLY-yahs) of Costa Rica are as diverse as the country itself – you'll find a mixed bag of soft white sand, black volcanic sand, pebble beaches, brown or gray gritty sand, muddy mangroves, rocky outcroppings, soft lapping waves, roaring surf, hidden reefs, spectacular dawns and breathtaking sunsets.

If you are looking for a beach vacation with lots of sun, sand and surf, the beaches of Guanacaste, on the Nicoya Peninsula, offer some of the best. Stiff competition comes from the Caribbean beaches south of Limón down to the border with Panama – specifically Cahuita and Puerto Viejo. Surfers should check out our admittedly amateur evaluation of the best beaches to catch a wave on page 12.

Poás

◆ Volcanoes, Nature's Hot Spots

The most spectacular and exciting feature of Costa Rica's central and northern mountain ranges are the active volcanoes that form their high summits. Active not just a millennium or two ago; several of your friendly neighborhood volcanoes are still going strong. These are Poás, Irazú, Barva, Orosí, Tenorio, Rincón de la Vieja, Santa Maria, Miravalles and, the most active volcano of southern Central America, Arenal.

FIRE IN THE HOLE

The word "volcano" comes from the ancient Romans, who believed the tiny island of Vulcano, off northern Sicily, was the location of the fiery forge where the god Vulcan tempered Jupiter's thunderbolts. The myth reflects modern scientific findings closely, both for the tremendous hot fire of eruptions as well as the fact that volcanoes attract lightening strikes around their peaks.

The country's quieter mountainsides, fertile with the soil of eruptions eons ago, make ideal land for farmers and forests. Most of these volcanic peaks are classified as extinct or dormant. But you can

never be sure, as the small farming village of Tabacón, on the slopes of Arenal, found out in 1968. The entire village disappeared under a sudden lava flow.

Lava is the term for molten magma when it reaches the surface. Visiting the easily accessible volcanoes around San José – Poás and Irazú – is not particularly dangerous as these now vent only gas and steam, not lava. Their water-filled craters and lunar landscapes are absolutely fascinating and visitors view them from the safety of a viewing platform. A day-trip to either of these volcanoes makes a truly impressive and memorable experience – certainly one not to be missed.

The most talked about hot spot is Arenal Volcano, near La Fortuna. Arenal is a huge, cone-shaped dynamic volcano that rumbles and shoots rocks, lava, smoke and ash out its two main vents. When not obscured by rain clouds, it presents itself as a massive dark triangle with boulders as big as cars tumbling down its sides. At night, when the sky is clear and the lava flowing, it displays a light show like no other. There's a pretty real sense of danger from being

so close to such a powerful giant, but this thrill only adds a great deal to the experience.

Arenal's appealing bonus is the hot springs that bubble up from the ground to feed warm-water streams – popular as simple swimming holes or incorporated into a spa.

◆ Earthquakes

Costa Rica welcomed us on our very first night in San José with a *temblor*, a minor earthquake. Centered outside Cartago, 35 km/22 miles away, it measured about 4.2 on the Richter scale. People from California may hardly notice these kinds of rumbles, but it woke us East Coasters from a sound sleep.

An earthquake, called *terremoto* (moving earth) in Spanish, is caused by the shifting of sections of the earth's outer shell (tectonic plates). A severe earthquake can release as much as 10,000 times the energy of the first atomic bomb. Major earthquakes are relatively rare in Costa Rica, although the country has very active underground faults.

THE RICHTER SCALE

The scale that measures earthquakes is named after North American seismologist Charles F. Richter, who developed the magnitude numbering system in 1935. Each number of the scale represents a tenfold increase in the amplitude of ground movements as measured by a seismograph. An earthquake measuring 6.0 is 10 times as severe as one of 5.0.

Costa Rica's worst earthquake in recent times occurred on April 22, 1991, when a 7.1 *terremoto* struck the Caribbean side of the island, causing severe damage to Limón and destroying rail and many road connections between there and San José.

Environment

◆ Climate

As in most Central American countries, you can choose your climate in Costa Rica not so much by moving north or south, but by changing your altitude. You could also change your attitude, but

that's a different story. The beach communities at sea level on both coasts can be very hot and humid, while the climate of the Central Valley, for example, at 1,500 meters/4,934 feet, is a very pleasant spring-like year-round.

Unlike most of North America, Costa Rica has only two seasons: the rainy season, from May to November, and the dry season, from December through April. During the rainy season, rain generally falls in the afternoon and evenings; mornings are frequently sunny and bright. It doesn't necessarily rain every day. The dry season is a more popular time with tourists but there is little difference between the summer and winter temperatures.

◆ Ecology

Costa Rica boasts one quarter of its land area dedicated as "wildlife protected," and is rightfully proud of its remarkable national park system. Its conservation efforts are important because of its unique position in the north-south corridor between the two larger American landmasses. A primary stop on the evolutionary highway, it has an incredible multiplicity of individual animal, plant, insect and bird species. Tiny Costa Rica may cover only 0.03% of the planet's surface, but is the natural habitat for as much as 5-6% of the world's bio-diversity.

Unique "biological corridors" of undeveloped land have recently been created that, at least on paper, will allow animals to move unhindered between protected areas, instead of trapping them in pockets of parks. The phenomenon of "private reserves" – acreage bought and protected as natural areas by individuals or organizations – has supplemented the national effort and contributed in no small measure to the patchwork of protected areas.

The de-centralized overseer of forests, wildlife and protected areas is the Sistema Nacional de Areas de Conservacion (SINAC), governed in turn by the federal Ministry of Environment and Energy (MINAE). They pursue the goal of reaching sustainability in safeguarding the country's natural resources.

INBIO PARQUE

InBio is the National Biodiversity Institute *(www.inbio.ac.cr)*, a private, non-profit organization whose mission is "to promote a greater awareness of the value of biodiversity and thereby achieve its conservation and improve the quality of life for society." This ambitious biological and educational project is actually attempting to record and sample every species of plant and insect life in Costa Rica. North American universities and drug giants such as Merck are helping fund the project in the hopes of finding new medicines and cures from the rainforests' plants. Species collections and park trails are open to the public. Guided tours available. See page 116.

But, despite Costa Rica's successes in land management, it would be Pollyannaish to ignore the half of the glass that's empty. Costa Rica lost almost half of its forest cover between 1950 and 1990. Illegal miners, cattle ranchers and loggers continue to operate, at times openly, in protected areas. And big business and government still sometimes think with the old "bigger-is-better" tourism theories, approving mega-developments or turning a blind eye for certain resorts. (We go out of our way in this guide not to publicize any properties we believe have caused an inordinate amount of ecological damage.)

Fortunately for everyone concerned, *Ticos*, as Costa Ricans call themselves (short for *hermaniticos*, little brothers), tend to support the preservation of their natural heritage, even when it comes out of their pocket. So far, continued funding from world environmental organizations and the financial success of local eco-tourism programs in poorer sections of the country, helps keep pressure on the federal government to enforce environmental regulations. All of this is good news for the ecology and for all of us who enjoy eco-tourism as a great way to travel.

◆ Eco-tourism

Eco or "green" tourism came about with the heightened environmental awareness of the 1960s and 70s. Ecotourism is generally defined as low-impact activities in nature that help preserve and sustain the environment and benefit native people. The hope is that

this type of tourism can prevent and even reverse environmental destruction. The tourist trade in Costa Rica, in a country described by one naturalist as "one big safari park," is a test of that hope.

◆ It's Not Easy Being Green

Unfortunately, the designation "eco-tourism" is much like the nomenclature "organic" – it means different things to different people. Everyone at least agrees on the final objective: a "win-win" situation for the environment, the tourist, the travel industry and the local people. But whether it actually achieves its promise is another issue.

For an insightful and in-depth look at the problems and solutions of green tourism, read *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development*, by Martha Honey, published by Island Press.

Various environmental organizations have similar definitions, but it is generally agreed that true eco-tourism projects should meet these seven criteria:

1. Covers tourism only to natural areas
2. Minimizes ecological impact
3. Builds environmental awareness
4. Provides direct financial benefits for conservation
5. Provides financial benefits and empowerment for local communities
6. Respects local culture
7. Supports human rights

The Certificate of Sustainable Tourism

In response to the demand for more green tourism, Costa Rica's government developed a Certificate of Sustainable Tourism (CST) that they hoped would root out the "green washers" (businesses that abuse the concept of eco- or sustainable tourism). The tourist board, ICT, awards "Blue Flags" to clean beach destinations and lists certified "green leaf" eco-friendly properties on their CST website *(www.turismo-sostenible.co.cr)*.

Unfortunately, because the criteria favor larger establishments, many of the smaller, more rustic and ecologically friendly lodges don't even make the list. Let's hope that, as the process is fine-tuned, the certification process will get better and even more hotels

Parks & Reserves

Parks that are special and/or relatively accesible, are indicated in ***bold****.*

1. La Amistad International
2. **Arenal National Park**
3. Ballena Marino Nat.'l Marine Park
4. Barra Honda National Park
5. Barva Volcano
6. Baula Nat'l. Marine Park
7. **Braulio Carrillo National Park**
8. **Cahuita National Park**
9. **Chirripó National Park**
10. Isla del Coco
11. **Corcovado National Park**
12. Guanacaste National Park
13. **Guayabo National Monument**
14. **Irazú Volcano**
15. Juan Castro Blanco National Park
16. **Manuel Antonio National Park**
17. Miravalles Volcano
18. **Palo Verde National Park**
19. Las Esquinas/Piedras BlancasNat.'l Park
20. **Poás Volcano**
21. **Rincón de la Vieja National Park**
22. **Santa Rosa** (and Isla Bolaños) National Park
23. Tapantí-Macizo de la Muerte
24. Tenorio Volcano
25. **Tortuguero National Park**

WILDLIFE REFUGES

26. Caño Negro
27. **Curú**
28. Ostinal
29. Tamarindo
30. **Barra del Colorado**
31. Gandoca-Manzanillo
32. Golfito
33. Junquillal
34. Peñas Blancas

BIOLOGICAL RESERVES

35. Manuel Alberto Brenes
36. Barbilla
37. **Carara**
38. Hitoy-Cerere
39. **Isla del Caño**
40. Islas Guayabo, Negritos, & Párajos
41. Lomas de Barbudal (San Ramón)
42. **Hacienda Barú** (private)
43. Hacienda la Pacífica (private)
44. Marenco (private)
45. **Monteverde** (private)
46. **Rara Avis** (private)
47. **La Selva** (private)
48. **Tiskita** (private)

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will respond to the demand for environmentally responsible practices.

We note in our reviews the tours, lodges and hotels with a positive environmental awareness and omit those we suspect of "green washing."

National Parks, Reserves, Preserves & Refuges

The "golden toad" (*bufo periglenes*) is a beautiful animal. A brilliant orange-colored male, it's the kind of toad even a princess would kiss – if she could find one. Originally discovered in 1964 by biologists Jay Savage, Norm Scott and the late Jerry James, it was known to exist only in its breeding ground, the Monteverde Cloud Forest. In the early 1980s, biologists counted more than 1,500 adult golden toads (*sapo dorado* in Spanish) in an annual survey. The next year the researchers found only 11. By 1987, they could find only 1. Since that day, golden toads have never been seen again. As a group, frogs were on the planet long before dinosaurs, so why then are they disappearing all over the world? Especially from such a protected area such as Monteverde? No one is sure, although it seems to be related to environmental pressures. Scientists currently suspect a toxic fungus encouraged by global warning. The plight of the frogs is a biological warning sign for our Earth.

Golden toad (Charles H. Smith)

Ecological awareness has always been a theme in Costa Rica's political history, perhaps because of the country's natural beauty. In 1775 Spanish colonial governor Don Juan Fernandez de Bobadilla issued a proclamation against slash-and-burn farming, "*since the practice is followed by sterility of the soil*." In 1833, green belts of permanent farmland and forests around cities were mandated, and in 1846 the government set aside forested watershed areas. By

1859, Costa Rica ordered for preservation all uncultivated lands in a 15-km/nine-mile zone on either side of the main rivers in the Central Valley.

READ ALL ABOUT IT

The story of the creation of Costa Rica's remarkable national park system is one of hard work, imagination, dedication and a tremendous amount of luck. It also makes for a great read. Pick up a copy of *The Quetzal and the Macaw*, by David Rains Wallace, a Sierra Club book.

The first attempt at establishing a true national park system came in 1939, when a law created a two-km/1.25-mile protected zone around the two local volcanoes, Irazú and Poás, overlooking the Meseta Central. A second zone was created on either side of the then newly built Inter-American Highway that bisected an old-

Toucan in the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve

growth oak forest. Despite the law, the sides of the volcanoes were cleared for pasture, and the oak trees were cut and shipped to Spain to be made into wine barrels. By the early 1960s, several foreigners (*extranjeros*) had taken preservation into their own hands, buying land to prevent its degradation. Archie Carr, a herpetologist, worked with local people to save the turtles at Tortuguero. ornithologist Alexander Skutch and botanist Leslie Holdridge bought farmland to preserve part of a rainforest. Their holding became the famous La

Selva private preserve. Way back in 1951, a group of expatriate Quaker dairy farmers purchased a cloud forest in the mountains of Tilarán that would become Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve.

So it may be fitting that the "god-parents" of the first official Costa Rican park were foreigners as well. Aspiring fruit farmers Karen and Olof Wessberg landed in the Nicoya Peninsula on Costa Rica's northwest Pacific coast in 1955. They had bounced around the world from Denmark and Sweden, their respective home countries, and finally settled in Montezuma, a small town on the southern Nicoya coast, because they enjoyed its quiet natural beauty. They especially loved living next to one of the last wilderness areas on the peninsula, Cabo Blanco (White Cape). In 1960 they woke up to find someone cutting trees and clearing a small *finca* (farm) in the primary forest. Olof set out to buy the entire tract (at $10 an acre) in order to have the government put it off-limits to development. His unique appeal yielded offers from the British World League Against Vivisection, Sierra Club, Philadelphia Conservation League, Nature Conservancy and the Friends of Nature. After much effort, Cabo Blanco became the first Costa Rican national park. However, government bureaucracy had no experience in managing such an ambitious endeavor (or the large Santa Rosa tract they later acquired in 1966). In 1969, in typical Latin American make-do fashion, they hired two graduate students – Mario Boza, 27, and Alvaro Ugalde, 24 – to run a new national park system. They could not have made a better choice. On a trip to the US in 1960, Mario Boza had been so impressed with the Great Smoky Mountains Park that upon his return he drew up a master plan for Poás Volcano as if it were a national park. His master's thesis would become the blueprint for other Costa Rican parks. Alvaro Ugalde was a biology student at UCR who had taken a national parks management course at the Grand Canyon in the US.

If the Wessbergs' efforts gave physical birth to the park system idea, these two uncommonly gifted environmentalists raised it to adolescence. Boza and Ugalde's foresight and hard work gave Costa Rica the foundation required to build upon a relatively modest start and create a viable national park system that is now the envy of the world.

Park fees are about US $9 for all foreign tourists, but cheaper for local residents. It's a way of funding the lesser-used parks and, although many foreign visitors feel it's unfair, we believe it's a good way to insure the park system's survival. Though the government still struggles with funding (the land in several parks has not been

paid for, many years after its expropriation) Costa Rica has found that protecting its natural heritage has paid unexpected benefits well beyond everyone's expectations.

Flora

With over 15 different ecosystems and transitional zones, it's no wonder Costa Rica is a botanist's and gardener's delight. Even if you can't tell the difference between a heliconia and a jacaranda, you can appreciate the verdant textures and colors of Costa Rica's flora. It's everywhere you look.

LIVING FENCEPOSTS

A "living fence"
(Bruce & June Conord)

"Living fence-posts" are a phenomenon attributed to the combination of climate and the properties of native *arboles* (trees). As they do worldwide, ranchers and farmers here use cut tree trunks or branches to make inexpensive fences. But once these twigs are stuck in the rich Costa Rican soil, the nearly-dead branches take root and grow, creating a row of sapling trees that divide fields. Several tree species perform this amazing task, including Indio desnudo, erythrina (used to shade coffee), fig, madre maton and madre de cacao.

◆ Trees

Costa Rica chose the guanacaste (*Enterolobium cyclocarpum*) as its national tree, although it had an abundance of other choices. The

diversity of trees concentrated in Costa Rica is amazing. You'll recognize coconut palms on the beach and pine trees at higher elevations, but not perhaps *gmelina*, or teak, which are grown on lowland tree farms. An interesting tall tree is the Indio desnudo (naked Indian), whose peeling bark is a deep brick-red. The tree is also known as "sunburned gringo," for obvious reasons. Its fruit is a favorite of white-faced monkeys.

The dangerous manchineel tree (*manzanillo*) grows on and near beaches. The fruit is highly poisonous and, although the tree's shiny green leaves and spreading branches give good shade, don't sit under it.

One of the most important trees in Costa Rica's history is the cacao, the seed of which is used to make chocolate. The country was once a leading grower and still has a sizeable commercial crop.

Mangroves

Mangroves look more like shrubs than trees, but coastal mangroves (*mangle*) areas are a critical part of the ecosystem. Their many functions include protecting fish, sponges, coral and marine life under their intertwined roots, and sheltering bird nests in their brushy foliage above ground. Along the sea, mangroves dampen winds, high waves, and flooding when storms hit. Their importance as a wetland anchor and natural wildlife haven cannot be exaggerated.

Strangler Fig

Strangler figs (*ficus*) begin their life innocently enough, one among many epiphytes living on the branches of a rainforest tree. But soon their long woody roots wrap around the host tree on their way to the forest floor. After many years, competition

Strangler fig (Bruce & June Conord)

with the fig kills the host tree. It is not uncommon to come across a hollow, lattice work-like *ficus* formed in the shape of the tree that rotted out within it. One canopy tour in Monteverde features a climb inside the fig tree's tube-like structure up to the platform.

◆ Rainforests

One of the biggest misconceptions about the rainforest environment is that it rains all the time. Of course, when it does rain, it rains a lot. Rainforests are found in regions of low seasonal variations, with at least 1,800 mm (70 inches) of annual precipitation. Yet one type of rainforest doesn't get much rain at all. A famous example is Monteverde, which is a cloud forest. Cloud forests are frequently smothered in moisture-laden clouds, where most of the water comes from the constant drenching of dew.

Rainforest logging (Bruce Conord)

A typical characteristic of rainforests is the poor soil in which they thrive. Nutrients that feed the trees come from a sophisticated composting cycle that provides a thin but potent layer of good soil. Once cleared for cattle or farming, the thin soil quickly washes away or is used up, leaving barren ground. What this means is that rainforests cannot be regenerated – they are gone but not forgotten. Only 6% of the world's rainforests remain and they are disappearing at the rate of over 100,000 acres per day. That's an area the size of New York State every year!

The tragedy affects us all, even when we live far from the rainforest. They are the lungs of the earth, where oxygen is exchanged for carbon dioxide, and they clean and recycle water. Tropical rainforests support at least half of the world's plant and animal species.

Apart from being important watersheds, rainforests contain medical compounds that can benefit mankind. For example, more than 70% of the plants known to produce drugs with anti-cancerous properties are tropical. Indigenous peoples around the world, including the few left in Costa Rica, still use plants and home remedies medicinally with great effect. Undoubtedly, there are thousands of new medicines waiting to be found in the rainforest, yet man is cutting them down at a staggering rate. What a shortsighted legacy for our children.

◆ Flowers, Fruit & Fragrance

It has always intrigued us to find plants that barely survive on our kitchen windowsill at home growing wild and abundant in the jungle. Philodendron and dracaena become huge in the jungle and are grown as export crops. Hibiscus thrives here, as do exotic herbs and the stunning ornamental heliconia flowers. The ubiquitous large red, orange and pink blossoms of the Oriental import, bougainvillea – one of our favorite semi-tropical flowers – appear in every garden, framing colonial courtyard arches or growing along a wall. The gigantic (up to two meters/6.6 feet wide) leaves you may see crossing Braulio Carrillo Park are poor man's umbrellas, and really are used for as umbrellas by local people caught in a shower. (That is, except those in parks, where it is illegal to cut a plant.)

Poor man's umbrella

Oranges, coconuts, guayaba, papaya and mango are the homegrown fruits of the countryside. You'll see vibrant green rice paddies in the lowlands of both coasts. Sugar cane is an introduced, grass-like plant with feathery flowers, which can grow to five meters (15 ft) in height. But coffee and bananas are king. Coffee is a tree-like shrub with glossy dark leaves and white flowers. It grows best at a mid-level altitude under shade trees. Each red berry contains two coffee beans, which are harvested from October through January. Costa Rican coffee is among the best in the world.

Bananas were first introduced in the New World in 1516. They are a squat, palm-like tree whose delicious soft fruit grows in bunches on a drooping stalk. Bananas like a lot of moisture but cannot thrive with wet roots. On the banana plantations, trenches are dug on either side of the crop rows to drain the water. Until mature, blue insecticide-impregnated bags cover the bunches.

Orchids

Costa Rica is world renowned for its exotic, beautiful orchids. Orchids are the largest family of flowering plants in the world and they thrive in warm, humid climates. The many varieties sport hundreds of flower styles, from tiny delicate petals running along the stem to bold blossoms and big thick green leaves. Costa Rica claims up to 1,500 different varieties, 75% of which are epiphytes. Epiphytes (from the Greek for "upon plants") attach to host trees and gain their nourishment from airborne dust and rain. The purple guaria orchid (*Cattleya skinneri*) is the national flower.

Guaria orchid *(Costa Rica Study Tours)*

A great place to see and learn about all these magnificent flowers is Lankester Botanical Gardens outside Cartago on the way into the Orosí Valley. See page 155.

Ferns are orchid relatives, and they are grown as cash crops in Costa Rica. Those large black mesh tents that cover the hillsides at cooler elevations are usually protecting ferns grown for export.

Fauna

The animal kingdom in Costa Rica is larger than life. The country has many microclimates and it teems with a staggering range of wildlife, partly because of its location on a land bridge between continents. Some of the common mammals include the coati (*pizote*), a dusk and dawn hunter related to the raccoon (*mapache*). The collared peccary (*saíno*) resembles a pig and lives in large groups in the forest. The rodent-like agouti (*guatusa*) can be found foraging on the forest floor near rivers and streams.

Baird's tapir

Tapirs (*macho de monte*), huge 250-kilo (550-lb) mammals, are rare and endangered; partly because they're prized as delicacies on the dining table, and partly because of shrinking habitat.

Famous frogs include the golden toad (*sapo dorado*), now feared to be extinct, the red-eyed tree frog, and the poison dart frog (*dendrobates pumilio*). The latter is a tiny frog that advertises its toxicity with its bright color. They are less than an inch long and can be found under low plant leaves.

The leathery-scaled, olive-gray crocodile (*crocodilo*) has beady eyes that stare blankly from its head as it skims the surface of the water hunting for frogs, fish, birds and small mammals. They and their slightly smaller cousin, the dark brown caiman, hunt mainly at night. During the day they sun themselves along the banks of rivers and mangrove swamps.

But it's the snake (*serpiente*) that most people worry about when trekking around the forest. Costa Rica has 162 species; but only 22 are poisonous. Snakes generally slip away when humans approach, but the one that is responsible for the most bites is the ag-

Facing page: Red-eyed tree frog (Snowleopard1)

gressive fer-de-lance (known by its Spanish name, *terciopelo*). It has olive-brown to dark-brown skin with light color "X" markings along its back and sides. If you are bitten, seek help immediately. The king of snakes is the boa constrictor, which kills its prey by crushing it in a tight coil. When hiking; stay on the trail.

Fer-de-lance (Al Coritz)

You can admire these snakes safely in the *serpentarias* in San José, Grecia, or Parque Viborana near Turrialba.

◆ Primates

Monkeys are a favorite with tourists and always cause a stir when they pass overhead in trees. They are intelligent, forest-dwelling social animals that travel in extended family groups, called troupes. The three main species you'll encounter in Costa Rica include the most common, the large howler monkey (*mono congo*), a black, relatively slow-moving vegetarian primate. The alpha male, with his troupe of up to 20, is usually the biggest of the bunch and if he's annoyed he'll let out the growl (a guttural who-

Howler monkey

White-faced capuchin (David M. Jensen)

who-who) that can be heard for long distances. Be careful standing underneath howlers, they'll sometimes throw fruit or, worse, try to pee on your head.

The white-faced capuchin (*mono cara blanca*) is a smaller, more rapid, treetop-dwelling insect eater. Their moniker comes from the hood of white fur on their shoulders, chest and face. They can be found on the Caribbean lowlands, and in Osa, Manuel Antonio, Monteverde and Guanacaste.

The blond-chested, black-handed spider monkey (*mono araño*) is famous for its long prehensile tail, which acts as a third hand. These agile monkeys can leap an incredible 10 meters/33 feet from branch to branch.

A fourth type of monkey is much less visible than those mentioned above. The squirrel monkey (*mono titi*) can be found only along the lowland Pacific coast. Its black head, olive-green shoulders and orange hands, feet, back and calves, make it easily distinguishable.

Jaguar (Bruce & June Conord)

◆ Cats

The king of the jungle is the jaguar (*tigre*), the largest of the New World cats. It holds a special place in indigenous culture: it is the

form taken by the sun when it descends into the underworld at night. A male jaguar may reach over six feet in length and can weigh in at 136 kilograms (300 lbs). Jaguars feed on tapirs, peccaries, foxes, turtle eggs, rodents, even deer – but rarely man. Because of the dwindling habitat – each big cat requires a forested area of 100 square miles – they are vulnerable to extinction in Central America.

The jaguarundi (*león breñero*) is the smallest cat, with a low-slung body resembling that of a weasel. Jaguarundi range in color from brown to gray and are slightly larger than a household cat. They stand 14 inches at the shoulders and weigh as much as nine kilograms (20 lbs). A sinuous tail takes up nearly half of the cat's 35- to 55-inch length. Already a rare animal, it's becoming rarer as its natural habitat in wild thickets and lowland forests is cut and burned for ranching.

Jaguarundi (Tannin)

Ocelot (Cordyph)

The ocelot (*manigordo*) is one of Latin America's most beautiful and rare cats, noted for its creamy tan fur and dark spots with open

centers. Ocelots usually weigh from 20 to 32 lbs and grow to 33-40 inches in length. They're solitary ground hunters, but are agile enough to climb trees if threatened. Their main predator is man, who values their fur for coats.

The puma, which is also native to the United States and Canada, is otherwise known as the cougar or mountain lion. A full-grown male puma may be nearly as big as a jaguar and weigh 91 kilograms (200 lbs). Its soft fur coat runs from reddish to gray to brown. This big cat is an amazingly agile climber, able to leap 13 meters (40 feet) in length and an astounding five meters (15 feet) high.

You'll have to be very lucky to see any of these felines in the wild; we were thrilled to have a jaguarundi cross our path when we were on the Nicoya Peninsula.

◆ Sloths

Three-toed sloth (Christian Mehlführer)

The family of *edentata*, indigenous to the Americas, includes ant-eaters, armadillos and sloths, a favorite of guides who seem to know all their favorite hang-outs in trees (usually *guarumos*) along your route. Costa Rica is home to two types of sloths, the often-viewed three-toed sloth, a diurnal animal, and the seldom-seen, nocturnal, two-toed sloth. The brown three-toed and two-toed sloths are tree-dwelling leaf eaters with an incredibly sluggish, fermentation-based digestive system. They move very slowly to conserve energy, so slowly that their Spanish name is *perezoso*, which means "lazy."

◆ Turtles

There are five major species of large sea turtles that nest on Costa Rica's shores, and their mostly nocturnal egg-laying is a wonderful thing to see. Turtles return to the same beach each year and lay their precious eggs by digging a shallow hole in the sand with their flippers. Any type of unnatural light or noise will disturb the giant lumbering females and can cause them to abort their nest. Once covered over, the hatchlings emerge about 60 days later and crawl toward the surf – if they're lucky. Between wrong turns and predators – sea gulls, large fish, raccoons, foxes and human poachers – rarely do more than 4-5% grow to maturity. Six of the seven turtle species worldwide are endangered.

The green turtle (*Tortuga verde*) mates and lays its eggs on the beach several times a year. Green turtles are especially common at Tortuguero, where the Caribbean Conservation Corps was begun. They measure about a meter (3.3 feet) in length and weigh 75-200 kilos (165-440 lbs).

Loggerhead (Strobilomyces)

Loggerheads (*cabezona*), with their massive bird-jawed skulls, have short fins and grow to a little over one meter (three feet) in length. They nest on other beaches but seem to gather in larger numbers at Playa Grande near Tamarindo.

The black, narrow-finned leatherback turtle (*baula*) is named because of its leathery hide in place of a shell. Leatherbacks grow as

Hawksbill (Tom Doeppner)

large as two meters (six feet) and weigh up to 680 kilos (1,500 lbs). That's living large! They come ashore on both coasts but especially at Playa Grande near Tamarindo, Tortuguero and the Gandoca Manzanillo Refuge.

On the other side of the coin, the hawksbill (*carey*) is one of the smallest marine turtles at about one meter (three feet) or less and only 91 kilos (200 lbs). Because of its highly valued spindle-shaped tortoise shell, it has been hunted to near-extinction.

The Olive Ridley, also called the Pacific Ridley (*lora*), nests at Ostinal near Playa Nosara and at Playa Nancite in Santa Rosa Park.

◆ Birds & Butterflies

When birdwatchers die, they want to go to heaven in Costa Rica. Over 850 species of birds make their appearance in the diverse ecosystems here, many on migratory vacation from colder climes. The national bird of Costa Rica is the yigüirro (*Turdus grayii*), pronounced *yi-GWE-ro*, is a robin without the red breast, and is renowned for its melodious song. The most spectacular native bird is the quetzal (pronounced KATE-zal), a brilliant green cloud forest dweller with a wispy, 60-cm/24-inch plumed tail. These large birds (up to 35 cm/14 inches tall) are found only at altitudes between 1,200 and 3,000 meters (4-10,000 feet). They are most commonly

seen at mating time between February and April, feeding in fruit trees, notably in Monteverde and Tapantí-Macizo de la Muerte parks. In the belief that they could not survive in captivity, they became a symbol of freedom in Central America.

Yigüirro (Mdf)

Oropéndolas are the large black birds with yellow tails that build those fascinating pendulum-shaped nests you see hanging from branches. The nests look like woven Christmas tree decorations. And where would the tropics be without the symbols of tropical climates, the toucan and the scarlet macaw (*lapa roja*). The macaw's vibrant colors begin with red and orange and then add yellow, gold, blue and green. Because of its beauty, and its apparently monogamous mating characteristic, it is prized as a pet. Export is illegal, but still this Pacific coast dweller (and its cousin, the green macaw in the Caribbean) are in great danger of extinction.

Scarlet macaw (Xavier Marchant)

Dedicated birdwatchers could pick up Birds of Costa Rica*, by Gary Stiles and Alexander Skutch (Cornell University Press) or* Travel & Site Guide to Birds of Costa Rica*, by Aaron Sekerak (Lone Pine Press).*

Facing page: Motmot (Roxana Vargas Solano/Dreamstime.com)

Blue morpho butterfly
(Gregory Phillips)

We also enjoy watching the many different colors of hummingbirds. Of the 330 known hummingbird species, about 65 are native to Costa Rica.

The large blue morpho butterfly is quite a stunning sight against the deep green of the forest. Brilliant and plain butterflies abound in gardens, as well as in the warm rainforest.

If you're a serious fan of these fascinating, delicate insects, pick up *Butterflies of Costa Rica*, by Phillip de Vries, a huge paperback.

Dr. Richard Whitten has assembled a world-class collection of weird and wonderful insects in his Jewels of the Rainforest Museum at Selvatura Park in Monteverde (see page 214). His colorful butterfly and bug displays are as much works of art as they are educational tools. Get him talking about his work and you'll never get away, but what a pleasure to meet someone who really loves his work.

The People, Their History

You won't see a "Yankee Go Home" banner at a demonstration in Costa Rica. In fact, you'll see many signs that read, *Bienvenidos*, "Welcome." Costa Ricans are a warm and welcoming people that really like North Americans – and they show it. The gringo community of full- and part-time residents is quite large, with many Canadian and American retirees drawn by the climate, social benefits and lower cost of living.

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TICOS & TICAS

Costa Rican people call themselves Ticos or Ticas (female). These national nicknames stem from *hermaniticos* and *hermaniticas*, meaning little brothers and little sisters.

The local culture is typical of Latin America in that it is predominantly Catholic and conservative – but not stridently so.

An old Costa Rican saying claims, "We have more teachers than soldiers," and that is still true today, some 60 years after Costa Rica abolished its army. The country has a history of peace and stability unmatched among its neighbors and is known for its tolerance. This status has made it a natural asylum for penniless refugees as well as wealthy deposed dictators.

Life here runs on Tico time, which means that a 2 pm appointment may be 2:30 or even 3:30. On the other hand, all these things pale in comparison to the genuinely pleasant nature of *los Ticos*.

History

◆ People Before Time

People inhabited this part of the isthmus that is present-day Costa Rica for at least 11,000 years. Some of the relics left by the earliest Stone Age settlers show both North and South American influences – a sign of Costa Rica's importance as part of the land bridge between continents.

The Chorotega, who lived in the northwestern corner and Nicoya Peninsula, were the largest of Costa Rica's many tribes. They left no written records, only highly stylized art and pottery. Their craftsmen worked in jade, gold and stone, and created the functional but artistic three-legged stone *metates* used for grinding corn. Some are still in use today, a thousand years later, by rural people. Chorotega pottery is glazed and is most often a light beige color with black markings. Local artists today have revived the lost indigenous methods and produce some unique and appealing works. They make valuable souvenirs.

Modern Chorotega pottery

In the drier regions of the Central Valley and highlands, indigenous people built stone foundations and large, stockade buildings that held extended family groups. They cobbled their pathways and created aqueducts and drainage systems in the style of their southern

cousins. The country's most important archeological site is Guayabo, an excavated city on the slopes of Turrialba Volcano. For an unknown reason it was abandoned about 100 years before the Spanish arrival.

But the most fascinating artifacts came from the Diquis, a lost native civilization who left behind thousands of near-perfect spherical stone balls. These remarkable balls are found only in Costa Rica's Southern Pacific zone. Some are as small as oranges and some are huge – as big as two meters/6.6 feet in diameter and weighing over 14,500 kilos (16 tons). You'll find some specimens in the Gold Museum, the National Museum and the Children's Museum in San José. In many private yards throughout the country, the balls are used as decorative garden ornaments. But who made these granite, andesite and sedimentary stone balls and why? No one knows, as the people who created them have long since disappeared. Today, 40,000 native people, divided into eight cultural groups, live on 22 reserves, most in the remote south.

Stone sphere in courtyard of National Museum of Costa Rica

The Conquest

Christopher Columbus gazed from his ship at the rich green vegetation of the shore, near the present-day Costa Rican city of Limón, which he called "Cariari." This September, 1502 journey, was to be was Columbus's last attempt to discover a route to the Orient – plus finally acquire a little something for himself.

The Carib natives he encountered on the shore of this verdant land wore gold pendants around their necks and seemed friendly. Immediately, he decided to petition the Spanish Court to govern this

rich coast of Veragua. Fortunately, he could sail better than he could name because the Veragua moniker was soon dropped in favor of its descriptive adjectives: rich coast (*costa rica*).

But the rich land he expected as a reward turned out to be one of the poorest of Spain's American colonies. Impassable terrain, huge mountains, raging rivers, floods, heat, swamps, at least 19 separate hostile tribes, plus a lack of mineral wealth, made the eventual "conquest" of Costa Rica more like a stern test of survival than a military victory.

Captain Gil González organized the first major invasion in 1522. He and his men acquired enough gold to make the "rich coast" name stick for good, but they failed to establish a permanent settlement. The grandson of Columbus, Luis, mounted an expedition in 1546, after the King of Spain at last granted his family's long-sought title, Duke of Veragua. Most of his 130 men were lost and the New World's last direct link with its European discoverer ended.

Finally, in 1563, Juan Vásquez de Coronado founded the settlement of Cartago, Costa Rica's first capitol and its first real city. By the late 1560s, when Coronado was lost at sea on his way back to Spain, the native inhabitants of Costa Rica were either in slavery, dead from the many diseases that decimated the population, or living in remote, inaccessible areas.

◆ Colonial Times

Colonial times were hard for all. Costa Rica, rich in flora and fauna, did not have the easily accessible gold that spurred the Spanish to conquer and settle the New World. And its native population, scattered and decimated, made the *encomienda* system – where local natives became the slaves of landowners – less than successful. For lack of manpower, most farms became family farms, and the national myth holds that because everyone had to work for survival, no class system developed here as it did in Mexico or Guatemala. The legacy of hard-working, independent-minded farmers is the basis for Ticos' love of democracy. Of course, that version glosses over the maltreatment of natives and Caribbean-Africans – yet one cannot deny that Costa Rica's long-time democratic leanings ultimately avoided the worst of the social turmoil that plagued its Latin neighbors.

But the economy was another story. Although the land was relatively fertile, the rough terrain hampered exports. Things got so bad that in 1709, cacao beans (the sole export) became the official cur-

rency. By September 15, 1821 its 65,000 inhabitants were all but forgotten as a colony – so they were surprised to hear that Guatemala had declared independence from Spain on behalf of all Central American countries. Like city states of ancient Greece, each of the four largest Costa Rican cities insisted on being the capital of the new country. In March 1823, a quick battle in the Ochomongo hills (a hilltop monument commemorates the fight along the Cartago-San José Highway) resulted in a republican victory, independence, and the designation of San José as Capital.

◆ Democracy & Coffee

Wealthy landowners and aristocracy met in San José and elected Juan Mora Fernández as the first chief of state. As a leader, Mora encouraged coffee growing and began modest exports of the bean through Chile to Europe, where the dark brew was becoming a fashionable drink. Mora's second successor, a domineering San José lawyer, Braulio Carrillo, came to power in 1835. Carrillo imposed liberal reforms and revised anachronistic civil and penal codes. His greatest legacy, however, was his strong promotion of coffee production throughout the Central Valley. He gave free trees to the populace to plant in their yard, and offered free land to anyone who would grow coffee on it. But his despotic ways did not sit well with the now democratic country. Exiled to El Salvador in 1842, he was assassinated there three years later.

Fortunately, Carrillo's agrarian efforts had insured Costa Rica was well positioned on Christmas Day, 1843, when the English captain, William Le Lacheur, sailed into Puntarenas looking for cargo. Growers in San José, with plenty of coffee to sell, trusted him with their goods on consignment. Two years later Le Lacheur returned with plenty of pounds sterling – the beginning of direct trade, an economic relationship with England, and the first good times for Costa Rica. Coffee gained the nickname *grano de oro*, or "grain of gold."

Coffee, one critic observed, "became a religion instead of a mere crop." If there was no big class difference before, the rise of an

aristocacia cafetalera changed all that. The coffee boom brought coffee barons, wealth and development to ports such as Puntarenas and Puerto Limón, roads and railways, and new hospitals and schools. But a monocrop and consequent monoculture breeds its own set of financial and social problems. For the first time a privileged class system, based on coffee profits, emerged.

COFFEE TIME

The origin of coffee lies in the legends and myths of Africa and the Middle East. One story tells of Kaldi, an Ethiopian goatherd who found his animals eating at a dark-leaved shrub bearing red berries. Another legend attributes the discovery of coffee to Omar, an Arabian dervish exiled to the African wilderness. He survived by brewing the berries he picked from coffee bushes. Whoever discovered it, coffee is considered native to Ethiopia.

By the early 1500s, coffee had made its way around the Middle East, and Arab patrons of coffeehouses lingered over the sweetened black brew. These early coffeehouses introduced the drink to European traders, who recognized it as a potential crop for their various tropical colonies. But the Arabs prevented the Europeans from taking live bushes in order to keep their monopoly. The Dutch finally obtained a coffee plant from Yemen and began cultivating coffee commercially in 1616. Sacks of beans labeled from plantations in one of their East Indian colonies, gave rise to one of coffee's best-known nicknames, "Java."

The credit for introducing coffee to the New World goes to Gabriel Mathieu de Clieu, a French naval officer. In 1720, he sailed for the French colony of Martinique with three coffee seedlings, obtained under highly questionable circumstances. Becalmed en route, de Clieu shared his water ration with the seedlings. His sacrifice paid off. Once planted on his estate in Martinique, the bushes flourished. From there, coffee cultivation spread to other countries in the New World. Costa Rica ranks 11th in world production and exports 280 million pounds of top-quality beans.

For many years, brightly painted oxcarts carried the precious bean down from the mountains to the Pacific port of Puntarenas. However, the coffee oligarchy realized that in order to stay competitive the country needed better access to the Atlantic. In 1871, to finance a new rail route to Limón, a deep-water shipping port on the Atlantic side, the government borrowed $8 million dollars from England. But when coffee prices hit bottom in 1900 it caused a severe food shortage and famine and the unfavorable financial terms of the loan hobbled the country's economy for 40 years.

◆ Bananas & the Jungle Train

By the mid-1800s, coffee had become very big business for small Costa Rica and its growers needed to ship more competitively to their European markets. They wanted a rail line to run 194 km (120 miles) east from Alajuela to Limón, the deep-water Atlantic port where Columbus first landed. The challenge was how to build it over impossibly high mountains, through formidable jungle and over swampy lowlands.

Minor Cooper Keith

The Atlantic Railroad project, which started optimistically in 1871, soon ran into trouble after nearly 4,000 workers died from disease and accidents in laying the first 20 miles of track. Minor Cooper Keith, a brash, young, charismatic North American with an adventurer's spirit, soon talked his way into directorship of the project. With construction in disarray, his bulldog determination pushed it forward. In 1884, he renegotiated the British loans for more favorable terms. As part of his compensation, he was granted the concession to operate the railroad and a lease on 323,887 hectares/800,000 acres – nearly 7% of the country – adjoining the rail line. Keith determined to cultivate bananas in the tropical lowlands to raise more funds for the construction. This proved to be both lucky and a stroke of genius.

The "coffee" railroad was finished by 1890, although the first freight was actually bananas. This side-venture for Minor Keith proved so successful that he merged his plantations with Boston

Banana plantation

Fruit to found the infamous United Fruit Company. Vilified as the worst example of foreign exploitation and economic domination of Central America, United Fruit proved to be the modern equivalent of the Spanish carpetbaggers of years before.

United Fruit's domination of the banana trade lasted until the late 1950s, when Standard Fruit (Dole) broke the monopoly, but even now the various banana companies' influence and economic power are clearly visible. Since the big strike of 1985, most of the independent agricultural unions have been broken and replaced by management-friendly "workers' associations," which every worker must join. Wages hover around US $75 a week for back-breaking, and sometimes dangerous, manual labor.

Part of the danger is from agro-chemicals used to fertilize and protect the banana trees. Herbicides and fungicides are used liberally and the blue bags you see covering the banana bunches are impregnated with pesticides to protect the fruit.

Culturally, Keith's importation of English-speaking workers of African descent also had a lasting impact on Costa Rica. Over the years, Ticos have had to face up to their own institutional racism, despite their reputation for tolerance and inclusion. Economically, the standard of living in Limón and along the Caribbean side in general, where most of the country's black population resides, is visibly lower than in the Central Valley.

Bananas still provide Costa Rica with millions of dollars in annual revenue and jobs for thousands of workers in economically depressed areas. Costa Rica is second only to Ecuador in world banana production (we always look for the "Grown in Costa Rica" label when we shop for our daily dose of potassium-rich bananas) – but the heralded Atlantic Railroad is no more. Financial losses caused the suspension of regular passenger traffic on November 20, 1990, just days short of the railroad's 100th birthday. The train's *coup de grace* came on April 22, 1991 when a powerful earthquake caused landslides that swept away large parts of the line. A small portion of the line is still running, reincarnated as a tourist attraction.

◆ Walker's War

William Walker (1855-60)

One of the most bizarre incidents in the bloody history of Central America involved Costa Rica. In 1855, William Walker, a Tennessee native, conquered neighboring Nicaragua with a ragtag mercenary army of Confederate sympathizers and carpetbaggers. He planned to export its residents as slaves. Walker isn't mentioned much in North American history books but is well remembered in Central America.

A boy genius, Walker graduated from the University of Nashville at age 14 and received law and medical degrees from the University of Pennsylvania by age 19. However, as brilliant as he was as a student; he failed as a doctor, lawyer and journalist. In 1849 he tried his luck, also unsuccessfully, in the California Gold Rush. His mind increasingly unbalanced, Walker came to believe that his true calling in life was to be a soldier of fortune. Not just a solider, but a leader of soldiers. To that end he joined a "liberation" expedition into Baja Mexico, sponsored by a pro-slavery group, the Knights of the Golden Circle. Before being driven out of Mexico, he egotistically declared himself, "President of Sonora and Baja California."

After taking over Nicaragua's government, Walker immediately legalized slavery. But his grandiose schemes ran afoul of Cornelius Vanderbilt, the powerful North American millionaire who owned large business interests there and hoped to build a trans-ocean canal through Lake Nicaragua. Vanderbilt encouraged Costa Rica to go to war and Walker conveniently supplied an excuse. With pro-slavery interests backing him, Walker and a few thousand men (known as "filibusters") invaded Costa Rica in March 1856. President Mora raised an army of 9,000 Ticos and marched on Walker's encampment, headquartered in a large farmhouse in Guanacaste province. Legend has it that on April 11, Juan Santamaría, a Costa

Rican drummer boy, torched Walker's farmhouse roof before dying in a hail of bullets. Santamaría became a national hero and the old farmhouse is now a national monument in the middle of Santa Rosa Park. The international airport in San José is named Juan Santamaría in his honor.

Walker later met his own fate in a way that showed how demented he had become. In 1857 he tried to conquer Nicaragua again, but was taken prisoner. Paroled in 1860, he sailed to Honduras, seized a port customs house, and immediately declared himself "President." Flushed out by Honduran soldiers, he took refuge on a British man-of-war but, after insisting he was the rightful President of Honduras, they put him back ashore. The army firing squad promptly executed him. He's buried in the "pirate's graveyard" in Trujillo.

Modern Times

Costa Rica went through growing pains typical of many nations after independence. In 1919. Federico Tinoco, Costa Rica's last dictator, was brought down – not by soldiers, but by teachers and students after a protest demonstration was fired on by his supporters.

In 1944, President Rafael Angel Calderón, a liberal who had previously instituted a social security system, labor code and other social guarantees, confiscated the property of Costa Rican families of German ancestry. He cited the U-Boat torpedoing of a United Fruit merchant ship (the *San Pablo*) in Limón as the reason. It was a serious political blunder because many of these families had been living there for generations and were part of the financially powerful coffee elite. The action set the stage for a Civil War four years later, a war that would claim the life of one in every 300 Ticos.

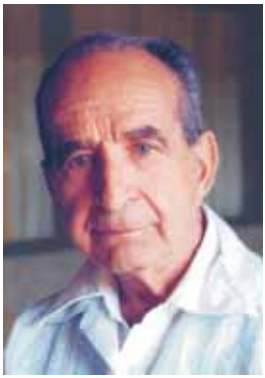
◆ Civil War

Like the War Between the States in America, Costa Rica's War of National Liberation in 1948 defined the nation. No single, simple cause made the country's men and women take up arms, but in Costa Rica's war, one man, Don Pepe (José) Figueres, became the symbol of the conflagration in much the same way Abraham Lincoln did in the US.

Self-educated in Boston, he returned to Costa Rica with an idealistic, utopian vision for his country's future. He criticized the govern-

ment as corrupt and unable to insure public order. Figueres was promptly arrested and exiled to Mexico, where he used his time to plan a revolution against what he and others considered a corrupt regime.

In the contentious elections of 1948, the opposition candidate was arrested and one of his advisors assassinated. Figueres and 600 volunteers marched on San José from his farm. Bullet holes around the turrets of the National Museum in San José are visible reminders of the 2,000 deaths in this short, but sad, civil war. Besides the abolition of the army, a source of continual pride today in Costa Rica, Figueres' temporary dictatorship also granted suffrage to women and extended citizenship to all people born in Costa Rica. This was particularly beneficial to the people of the Atlantic region, many of whom had previously been denied the rights of citizenship. Don Pepe Figueres was twice elected president, the last time from 1970-1974. He died a national hero in 1990.



Don Pepe Figueres

◆ Recent Memory

The 1980s were especially turbulent times in Central America. In 1979, communist Sandinista guerillas overthrew the oppressive, dictatorial government of Anastasio Somoza in neighboring Nicaragua. At first, Costa Rica supported the efforts of the Sandinistas, but it later served as a haven for Contra rebels, who fought against them in a long, bloody, US-backed insurgency. America gave large amounts of aid to Costa Rica in exchange for allowing the Contras to operate along their northern border, which only postponed the dire effects of its inflation-ravaged economy. Meanwhile, Costa Rica's foreign debt swelled to $3.8 billion and unemployment rose to over 15%.

In 1986, when Ticos elected Oscar Arias president, it proved to be a providential choice. He adopted an ambitious policy of federal government reduction and restructuring. With painful belt tightening, the economy slowly recovered. However, President Arias is

Oscar Arias

most remembered for his Central American Peace Plan, which helped end the war in Nicaragua. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987. The award reinforced Costa Rica's world standing as a tolerant, pluralistic, peace-loving country. He was re-elected in a surprisingly close vote in early 2006 and oversaw Costa Rica's entry into the Central American Trade Agreement.

Being There

Bienvenido a Costa Rica – welcome to Costa Rica! You shouldn't encounter too much culture shock upon arrival. Even if you're unused to the ways of Latin America, Ticos are used to you. Unlike other poorer, less-visited countries of the region, Costa Rica is essentially a modern nation with a cosmopolitan outlook toward the world. Costa Rica is often called a paradise. It boasts a beautiful countryside, modern infrastructure, tolerant society, religious freedom and a stable democratic government. Although it's not quite perfect, most tourists find Costa Rica offers them an ideal vacation that leaves nothing but fond memories.

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Culture & Customs

Like other Latin cultures, Costa Ricans are very family-oriented and Sunday is the big day for family outings in local parks. The park at La Sabana, for example, is filled with picnickers and joggers or groups playing soccer or basketball, and there are even free exercise and aerobics classes.

Costa Ricans are very polite and non-confrontational; they tend to be late for appointments, dance very well and are very friendly. Because it is not tropical with scorching hot afternoons, Costa Rica has not developed the culture of *siestas*, afternoon naps, that you find in countries such as Mexico.

◆ Holidays & Fiestas

Ticos know how to party and if you are lucky enough to share a holiday or fiesta with the local people, it will add a whole new dimension to your vacation. We had a marvelous time at a Mother's Day celebration in the small park opposite the metal school building in San

José. Ladies danced in colorful native costumes, food vendors sold myriad tempting treats, and the children rode ponies and competed in games (when they weren't being chased by the fantastic *payasos*, gigantic papier-mâché clown heads). It offered us the chance to be part of the local culture.

Some festival dates vary each year. Check with the Tourist Board *(US & Canada, 866/267-8274, www.visitcostarica.com)* for exact details.

JANUARY

January 1 – New Year's Day.

First two weeks – Fiesta de Palmares in Palmares, a quiet village 56 km/35 miles west of San José. Carnival rides, bullfighting, music and folk dancing.

Week of Jan. 15th – Fiestas de Alajuelitas. Oxcart parade to an iron cross overlooking town, honoring the Black Christ of Esquipulas. Also, Fiestas de Santa Cruz in Guanacaste, with marimba music, folk dancing and more.

FEBRUARY

First week – San Isidro de General Fair has livestock shows, industrial fairs, bull teasing and an agricultural and flower exhibition.

Last week – Sun Festival is an annual gathering for a fire ceremony to celebrate the Maya New Year on Feb. 25th. Look for info in San José. Same week is the Puntarenas Carnival, offering a week of fun in the sun in a working town that knows how to party.

MARCH

2nd Sunday – Día del Boyero (Oxcart Driver's Day), San Antonio de Escazú. A parade of colorful oxcarts, along with competitions and animal blessings.

2nd week – International Arts Festival throughout towns in the Central Valley. One of the best of its kind. Most cultural events take place in San José (check dates at www.festivalcostarica.org).

March 16-26 – Fruit Festival, Orotina. Fruits and vegetables from all across the country are exhibited and sold. Rides, food, lectures and concerts.

Mid-month – Pilgrimage. A religious procession beginning in Cartago and ending in Ujarrás at the ruins of the first church in Costa Rica.

March 19th – Saint Joseph's Day. St. Joe's namesake neighborhoods celebrate with special masses and fairs. People from San José picnic at Poás Volcano.

March or April – Holy Week. Religious processions depict crucifixion. Holy Week is especially popular in San José, Cartago and Heredia. Easter Sunday features a joyous procession of Resurrection. Popular, but many city dwellers head for the beach for a long weekend.

APRIL

April 11th – Juan Santamaría Day commemorates Costa Rica's national hero of battle with William Walker (see page 63). Celebrations all week, with parades, bands and dances. Especially big in Alajuela.

Last week in April – University Week. Concerts, exhibitions and parades at the University of Costa Rica in San Pedro.

Last week of April through first week of May, Artisan's Fair. San José hosts a popular craft fair.

MAY

May 1st – Labor Day. The President gives his annual State of the Nation address and Congress elects new leaders. There are many marches. City of Puerto Limón celebrates with picnics, dances and cricket matches.

May 15th – San Isidro Labrador's Day. Namesake towns honor the Patron Saint of farmers and farm animals. There are parades and fairs, and a priest blesses crops and animals.

May 17th – Carrera de San Juan is a big cross-country race challenging runners over a tough 22.5-km/14-mile course.

May 29th – Corpus Christi Day. Religious celebration and national holiday.

JUNE

Third Sunday – Father's Day. Dad's special day; ask him for an increase in your allowance.

June 29th – St. Peter and St. Paul Day. Popular religious celebrations for namesake towns.

JULY

Saturday closest to July 16th –Virgin of the Sea. In salute to Puntarenas' Patron Saint, Virgin of Mt. Carmel, there is a regatta of decorated fishing boats and yachts in the Gulf of

Nicoya. Parades, sports events, firework displays and religious masses are held.

July 25th – Guanacaste Day. Celebrates Guanacaste's 1824 decision to become a province of Costa Rica (instead of Nicaragua). Liberia holds fiestas, parades, folk dances, bullfight and concerts.

AUGUST

August 1 & 2nd – Virgin of Los Angeles Day. Honors Costa Rica's Patron Saint, La Negrita, with a nationwide pilgrimage to Cartago. Worshippers crawl on their knees in a procession. Also that day is Our Lady of Angels in Pardos, near Cartago, where figures topped by huge papier-mâché heads, called *payasos*, re-enact a battle between the Moors and the Spanish.

August 15th – Mother's Day, a national holiday. Mothers are treated to special meals, candy and flowers. Call home.

August 30th – San Ramóns Day. Neighboring towns parade 30 saints through the streets to the San Ramón church.

SEPTEMBER

September 15th – Independence Day. All of Central America celebrates their mutual Independence Day. In Costa Rica, student runners carry a "Freedom Torch" from Guatemala to Cartago, timed to arrive at precisely 6 pm on the 14th, when everyone in the country stops and sings the national anthem. Parades on the 15th.

OCTOBER

Early to mid-October – Carnaval in Puerto Limón. Mardi Gras-style parades, floats and dancing in the streets. This town knows how to party.

October 12th – Dia de la del Pilar. The San José district of Tres Rios celebrates its Patron Saint.

October 12th – Fiesta del Maíz. Corn is the focus in Upala with parades and costumes made entirely of corn husks, grains and silks.

NOVEMBER

November 2nd – All Soul's Day. Day of the Dead, which begins on the 1st, is observed by family visits to graveyards to leave flowers for departed loved ones.

End of November – Oxcart Parade down the Paseo de Colon, San José. Begun in 1997 to honor the oxcart heritage. Entries come from all over the country.

DECEMBER

All month – The Lights Festival in San José features homes and businesses decorated with lights. Parades, concerts and nightly firework displays.

Week of the 8th – Fiesta de los Negritos. Indian rituals combine with Catholic concepts to honor the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception. Costumes, drums, flute music and dance in the indigenous village of Boruca.

Fiesta de los Negritos

Week of 12th – Fiesta de la Yegúitta (Little Mare) in Nicoya. Virgin of Guadalupe is honored with ancient Indian rituals and special foods, processions, fireworks and concerts.

Mid-December – Posada season begins. Carolers go from house to house (many collecting for religious donations) and Tico friends, coworkers and families get together in homes and restaurants for long joyful meals.

Mid-December to end of month – Festejos Populares (Popular Festivals). South San José fairgrounds at Zapote put on the country's largest and most unusual year-end bash with rides, food, bull teasing, music and fireworks. As many as 200 people cram into the bullring and a bull is released into the crowd. Reminiscent of the "Running of the Bulls" in Pamplona, Spain, except there is no place to run. If Hemingway were still alive, he'd be dying to go.

December 25th – Christmas Day. Traditional dinner includes *tamales*, corn meal pastry stuffed with meat and wrapped and cooked in corn husks or banana leaves. Christmas Eve mass is the Mass of the Rooster, *Misa del Gallo*.

December 26th – Tope, the daddy of all horse parades, downtown San José.

December 27th – Carnival. A huge parade with floats and music takes place in downtown San José.

December 31st - January 2nd – Fiesta de los Diablitos. Indians of the southern Boruca region near Golfito enact a fight/dance between Indians, *diablitos*, and Spaniards. Indians dress in burlap sacks with elaborately painted masks; the Spaniards are two athletic young men in a bull costume. Village flute and drum music.

Food & Drink

You won't find native Costa Rican food listed high on the world's culinary scale. Perhaps it's too plebeian for some. Unlike Mexico's menu, it is neither spicy nor complex. But it is high on our list of comfort cuisine.

◆ Local Foods

Gallo pinto

The most typical dish in all Costa Rica is *gallo pinto*, "red rooster," a rice and bean dish served with breakfast and sometimes lunch and dinner. Different recipes include herbs or garlic, but the basic ingredients are always black beans and rice, bell peppers and onions. On the Atlantic side, rice and beans are flavored with coconut and Caribbean spices. Hot peppers are also more popular there.

Don't pass up an opportunity to try Lizano, the Costa Rican imitation of English Worcestershire sauce. This piquant blend of vegetables, chiles and sugar is used, like ketchup, on almost everything.

Fried plantains (a very large, firm variety of banana, also referred to as cooking bananas) are a common, sweet side dish to many breakfast and lunch meals. Salads are a slaw using red and green cabbage and flavored with oil and vinegar or mayonnaise. In a warm climate its very refreshing. The daily specials and cheapest dishes in most small restaurants are called *casados*, which means "married." Your choice of fish, meat or chicken is served side-by-side (that's where the "married" part comes in) with a scoop of rice and slaw salad. This is the lunch of choice, especially in *sodas*, small mom and pop eateries.

The most typical dish for lunch and dinner in the home (and popular in restaurants too) is *arroz con pollo*, chicken strips mixed in rice and chopped vegetables. Some other meals and snacks you

may come across include *olla de carne*, a heavy meat and vegetable soup; *picadillos*, a hash of potatoes, plantains and veggies; and *empanadas*, corn flour dough filled with meats, chicken or fruit and fried. Empanadas are the preferred bite at street carts or doorway snack bars.

The national dessert is *tres leches*, three milk cake, our favorite. There's also flan, a custard with caramel or coconut. Be sure to check out the offerings of bakeries, *panaderías*, where you select your treats with a pair of tongs, place them on a baking tray, then take them to the counter and pay.

Empanadas

◆ Coffee, Beer & Batidos

AUTHOR TIP: *To drink in Spanish is beber, but a waiter will ask para tomar? – what will you have?*

Don't go to Costa Rica without having coffee. It's a higher quality than typical North American everyday fare. *Café con leche* is coffee served in hot milk, like a cappuccino, only less expensive. In less sophisticated spots, it's Nescafé in hot milk. Buy your coffee to take home in a supermarket and save over gift store prices. Choose bags marked *puro*, not *traditional*, unless you like your sugar premixed in with the grounds. Ground coffee is marked *molido*, and whole bean is *grano entero*.

BATIDOS

With a proliferation of fresh fruit, there are no national refreshments as delightful as batidos, refrescos, and jugos. Jugos are fresh juices (jugo de naranja is orange juice), while batidos, and refrescos are juice shakes made with milk or water, respectively. We are absolutely addicted to batidos and love to try different exotic flavors, such as mango, blackberries (mora), tamarindo, pineapple (piña), guava, papaya, banana and strawberry (*fresca*) in milk (*leche*). Yum. Another treat is *horchata*, a rice-milk drink.

Not as well known outside of Costa Rica is the wonderful beer brewed here. Our favorite is Imperial, a lager, but you should decide on yours by trying them all! Pilsen is a light gold pilsner, while smooth Bavaria is a bit heavier and darker than Imperial. Tropical is a lightweight but a good brew in the hot lowlands. Be aware that many Ticos drink their beer in a glass with ice, so if that's sacrilegious to you, better make sure you say, *sin hielo*, (SIN YEL-low). The only brewpub we know of in Costa Rica, K&S (Plaza Cristal, 600 meters south of La Pops in Curridibat), makes a very tasty brew served along with tasty mid-priced meals. The national drink of the nation's alcoholics is Guaro, a sugar cane-based hard liquor that tastes like rubbing alcohol.

Since the first German beer brewers came to Costa Rica it has been the custom in *cantinas* and restaurants to serve a little snack with your drink. *Bocas*, which translates to "mouths" or "mouthfuls," is the name of the appetizer that nowadays may or may not come with your drink. Alas, the economics of scale have restricted the freebies to smaller bars in the countryside, or friendly places in town. The many kinds of *bocas* offered vary from *ceviche* (raw fish in lime juice) to *chicharrones*, heart-clogging fried pork rinds, and everything in between – including rice and beans. Ask for free *bocas*, but remember the standards of cleanliness in your local watering hole may not meet yours.

Alternative Accommodations

If you are looking for lodgings more intimate than a hotel, Costa Rica offers an ever-growing number of alternatives. Perhaps a home stay with a Costa Rican family or in-the-rough camping sounds good. But don't overlook some of the exquisite small hotels and inns we mention throughout the book – many of them boast tranquility, intimacy and charm, without the impersonal nature of a large hotel. In fact, the scarcity of large, cookie-cutter hotel chains insures most Costa Rican accommodations have distinct personalities.

◆ Down on the Farm

COOPRENA *(☎/fax 506/2259-3605, www.turismoruralcr.com)*. Eight agricultural cooperatives, ranging from Monteverde in the north to the southern Osa Peninsula, offer guests a rare opportunity to tour their farms and interact with resident families. Participants stay in rustic lodges, the proceeds from which are used for commu-

nal projects, such as fixing up roads, improving schools and cleaning the local soccer field. It's an admirable effort to convert tourist dollars directly into grass-roots conservation projects, encourage local people to follow sustainable practices and improve the quality of life.

Corcovado Agroecoturistic Association *(Puerto Jimenez, Osa, ☎ 506/2735-5440)* offers accommodations, meals, tours and logistical support for individuals or scientists in and around the Corcovado National Park on the remote Osa Peninsula.

If you've come to Costa Rica to get an education, think about the tropical agro-ecological farm La Flor de Paraíso Environmental School *(☎ 506/2534-8003, www.la-flor.org)*, near Paraíso, outside Cartago. It offers Spanish language and culture courses, organic farming, artisan workshops, tropical rainforest regeneration projects and a medicinal plant garden.

Goats at La Flor de Paraíso

◆ Bed & Breakfasts

The allure of bed and breakfasts, whether a spare room in a private home or an establishment with a number of rooms for rent, is their homey atmosphere and the opportunity to share close contact with others. To make arrangements in advance, you can phone any of the following booking agents, who do a good job matching clients to compatible Costa Rican families.

B&B BOOKING AGENTS

Bell's Home Hospitality *(☎ 506/2225-4752, fax 2224/5884, www.homestay.thebells.org)* organizes stays in the San José area. Many are spare bedrooms in 50+ private homes.

TurCasa *(☎ 506/2258-3381, Av 1 between Calles 5 & 7)* is a women's home-maker cooperative that offers "homestays" with their own families.

Besides B&Bs, another interesting way to stay in a homey atmosphere is to sign up for study at one of the many Spanish-language schools. They will make your residential arrangements in a participating local middle-class family's home.

◆ Hostels

Dormitory-style accommodations, some segregated by sex with shared baths, are a low-cost alternative and a great way to network with fellow travelers. Not just for "youth," these inexpensive hostels offer card-carrying travelers of any age, secure, clean and relatively comfortable lodgings. You'll find a number of senior travelers mixed with baby-boomers and college-aged backpackers from around the globe. Costa Rica boasts some 14 hostels from San José to Limón and places in between. Visit the Hostelling Costa Rica website for more information, www.hostelling-costarica.com. Hostelling International *(in US, ☎ 202/783-6161, in Canada, ☎ 613/748-5638, R. E.C.A.F. in Costa Rica, ☎ 506/2244-4085, www.hostels.com)* offers information on membership cards, reservations and details on each hostel.

◆ Camping

Most campsites provide potable water; we recommend taking your own bottled water just to make sure. Remember not to leave valuables in your tent unless there is someone around to protect them. Lastly, you may find it more enjoyable to choose the dry season for your trip because camping during the rainy season can be a muddy affair.

CAMPGROUNDS

PRIVATE CAMPGROUNDS NEAR THE BEACH:

Dominical - Antorchas Camping *(506/2787-0307, www.ecotourism.co.cr).*

Jacó Beach - Camping Madrigal *(☎ 506/2643-3329)* and Camping El Hicaco *(☎ 506/2643-3004).* Unless you're a party animal, it's best to avoid both camps on holiday weekends.

Montezuma Beach - Rincon de Los Monos *(☎ 506/2642-0048).* Open Dec.-May; call before arriving. Or try Camping Nidia Leal *(☎ 506/2642-0634).*

Playa Junquilla - Los Malinches Camping *(☎ 506/2658-8429)*

Pochote Beach - Camping Tino Zeledón, no phone.

Potrero Beach - Mayra's Camping & Cabinas *(☎ 506/2654-4213).*

Tamarindo - Bagatsí *(☎ 506/2659-9039).*

IN THE CENTRAL VALLEY NEAR SAN JOSÉ:

Alajuela Area

Laguna Fraijanes Recreational Park *(☎ 506/2442-2166)* offers huts without lights for up to four people for about US $11. A full-service hut runs $20 for two. Chalets sleeping eight, $25. US $2 per person with own tent, or $3 if you need to rent a tent. Bring linens. A restaurant is nearby.

HEREDIA AREA:

Bélen Trailer Park *(☎ 506/2239-0421)* has shady spots with or without hook-ups.

Getting Around

First, the good news: Costa Rica is a small country that allows you to travel from the Central Valley down to either coast in a short amount of time. That puts many eco-adventure destinations within easy reach, even for day-trips. The bad news is that some roads, especially in more rural areas, can be a trial. But Costa Rica has an excellent bus service as well as inexpensive domestic flights to remote corners of the country.

◆ Travel by Bus

If you have a single destination in mind, first-class bus service is the way to go. Vehicles are modern, travel almost non-stop, and are driven by someone who knows the roads from experience. There is no central terminal in San José for direct buses to other cities, so city planners have spread out the bus stops around town to lessen congestion. See page 405 in the *Appendix* for a schedule and San José bus stop/terminal locations. You can also check for changes online at www.costaricabybus.com.

San José & Vicinity

If you're staying in San José, then local buses are the best way to get around. Traffic is typical for big cities so having a car in town is often more of a liability than it's worth. Not to mention the parking, or the lack thereof.

Buses run frequently on popular routes and are very inexpensive, perhaps US $1 to the suburbs, 75¢ around town. Look for the name of your destination painted on the front windshield (not so easy to spot at night). Few bus drivers speak English, but many passengers do, so ask for help if you're unsure.

Around the Country

Don't be afraid to travel anywhere by bus. It's more ecological and there is no better place to be environmentally aware than Costa Rica. For excursions from San José into the countryside, we took either direct, first-class buses to destinations such as Jacó, Quepos or Puerto Viejo (most fares are under US $25), or semi-local buses to Cartago, Alajuela, Orosí and Heredia (about US $3).

◆ By Car

On the other hand, driving around Costa Rica in a rental car is a popular and convenient way to see the country. See page 80 for some driving tips. It's a small country; consequently many parts of it are within easy driving distance. Roads are generally well marked, although rarely with the route numbers you see on maps. Instead, occasional signs along the road tell you the number of kilometers to a larger city. Major routes are well paved and easy to follow.

Insurance

Before you decide if you want to get around by car, there are some caveats to renting. On top of the daily or weekly rental cost, you need to buy Costa Rican auto insurance as yours is not valid here. We recommend getting as much insurance as possible, including no deductible. It may cost more, but remember these are foreign cars on foreign roads in a foreign land... and you can be charged for every nick and dent. Many of the secondary roads in the mountains and along the shore are unpaved, unless you count the dirt between the yawning potholes. Due to heavy rains, hot sun, *temblores* and mountainous terrain, even paved roads are susceptible to deterioration and the occasional rock- or mudslide.

Rugged Terrain

Unless you stick to the main tourism areas in the Central Valley, you'll need to rent a four-wheel drive vehicle. Be cautious when driving in the mountains, where sudden fog or rain can envelope the road, reducing visibility to near zero. Another consideration is the lack of guardrails, even where there is a 1,000-meter drop on the side of serpentine, hairpin curves. In beach areas to the west, count on a lot of dust, especially in the dry season, and plenty of heat. Get a car with air conditioning if you're off to either Guanacaste or Limón.

If you're basing yourself out of San José for the first few days or last night of your stay, you don't need a car in town. Larger provincial cities offer car rentals, so you can always fly or take a bus to say, Liberia, and then rent a car. To get around the choking downtown traffic, San José built a *Periférico*, a bypass road to the south of the city that begins near the suburb of Escazú and ends just north of the San Pedro suburb. Along it are some hard-to-see traffic lights and absolutely insane traffic circles. Be brave. This road works best when it's not rush hour. Speaking of rush hour, the Paseo Colon becomes one-way during those times.

You'll soon see that Costa Rican drivers are *mucho loco*, and roads are in unpredictable condition. Our best advice is to slow down. Sooner or later, you'll be stuck behind a stinky, slow-moving truck and anxious to get where you're going – but don't worry, be happy. This is your vacation, not a commute to work.

See below for instructions on what to do and who to call if you're involved in a car accident. Call your rental company first; most have 24-hour help numbers.

Car Rental Companies

Poas Car Rental, a Costa Rican-owned company with pick-up service from the airport has an office at the Hampton Inn *(US ☎ 888/607-7627; Costa Rica ☎ 506/2442-6178; www.poasrentacar.com).* Other local renters are Tricolor *(☎ 506/2440-3333, www.tricolorcarrental.com)*, Toyota Rent a Car *(☎ 506/2223-8979, www.toyotarent.com)*, Europcar *(☎ 506/2257-1158, www.pregorentacar.com)*, Elegante *(in US, ☎ 800/582-7432, in Canada, ☎ 800-445-6499, ☎ 506/2257-0026, www.elegante rentacar.com*), and Tropical *(☎ 506/2442-8000).*

Want to rent a Harley Davidson motorcycle? Ask Maria Alexander Tours in Escazú *(☎ 506/2289-5552, www.mariaalexandra.com).* Rates include helmet, rain gear and lock.

International automobile agencies with toll-free numbers in the US are Avis *(in US,☎ 800/331-1212, 506/2442-1321)*, Budget *(in US, ☎ 800/527-0700, 506/2441-4444*), Hertz *(in US, ☎ 800/654-3131, 506/2441-0097)*, National *(in US, ☎ 800-328-4567, ☎ 506/2441-6533)*, and Thrifty *(in US, ☎ 800-376-227, ☎ 506/2442-8585).*

RULES OF THE ROAD

1. Unless posted otherwise, the urban speed limit is 40 kmh (25 mph); on highways it's a crawling 60 kmh (37 mph). Around schools or hospitals, 25 kmh (15 mph). Nobody pays attention to these limits.
2. Ceda el Paso means "Yield, Right of Way," which means you give way to oncoming traffic. It's a very common traffic sign at the many single-lane bridges.
3. Seatbelt use is required.
4. Driving on beaches is strictly prohibited.
5. If you are in accident, do not move your car until the police *(☎ 911)* tell you to do so.
6. Drive defensively!

You'll get a slew of free maps in Costa Rica, many of which are barely adequate at best. The best all-around map for the country is produced by Toucan Guides *(http://costa-rica-guide.com, $9.95*), not only because it is accurate, well indexed, and loaded with handy information, but it features a soft, flexible coating that resists tears and moisture. Get it before you go or download the PDF file. If you're a cheapskate, there's a free map – filled with ads but very useable – produced by www.costaricamap.com. It is available at most hotels and tourist information booths. International Travel Map, out of Vancouver, BC, Canada, produces a detailed country map. We bought one in San José 7th Ave. Bookstore.

◆ Hitchhiking

Increasingly, hitchhiking is a thing of the past around the world, with most "rides" offered only in more remote rural areas. We sometimes offer rides to walkers on the side of the road, but haven't encountered any true hitchhikers. If you're thinking of hitching, take all the precautions you would at home, such as not accepting a ride with someone who has been drinking or, if you're female, not accepting a ride from a carload of guys. It's always best to travel in pairs, but if you're hitchhiking that may mean a longer wait. Gringos are in the habit of passing you up and most Costa Ricans might think you're rich enough to take the bus which, given the low cost and safety, is probably a much better idea.

Picking up locals is another thing, especially in remote areas. We sometimes offer rides to people walking alongside the road, usually uphill, in order to practice our Spanish until the next village. When you let them off, it's a custom – at least among older folk, who may be as poor as church mice – to dig their hand into a well-worn pocket and ask, *Cuanto cuesta*? How much?

Simply smile and reply, *Por nada* (for nothing).

◆ Cross-Country Flights

A good way to cover the distances to the corners of Costa Rica is by air. To spend a weekend in Quepos or Tortuguero, for example, you can easily and relatively cheaply fly in puddle jumpers (twin or large single engine planes). Most flights last a half-hour or less, depending on stops.

Two main domestic airlines are Nature Airo airport, west of Pavas, in the US ☎ 800/235-9272, 506/2299-6000, fax 2220-0413, www.natureair.com) and Sansa (Grupo Taca office building, near Sabana Park, in the US ☎ 877/767-2672, 506/2290-4100, www.flysansa.com), which flies out of Juan Santamara airport.

During the high season, flights are often full so you need to book in advance or at least try to get reservations as soon as you arrive in Costa Rica. Both airlines sell tickets through local travel agents – a good way to assure service. We favor Nature Air flights. Surfboards add another US $15-20 surcharge. Don't bring a lot of luggage – there is a strict one-bag limit. Cost is $60 and up, depending on your destination.

Nearly all flights take off and return in the morning as Costa Rica's weather tends to deteriorate in the afternoon, especially in the rainy season.

AUTHOR TIP: Y*ou stand a better chance of getting a flight without a reservation when you're coming back into San José than if you're flying out. Keep calling to ask about cancellations, or have a travel agent call their contacts.*

Learning Spanish

The best way to learn Spanish is to take advantage of the many immersion courses offered at numerous language-study institutions around the country. Most schools offer two-week schedules, small groups, half- or full-day courses, tour options, academic credit and area lodging. Economical homestays, with a Spanish-speaking local family, provide a golden opportunity to practice your classroom learning. Homestays usually include breakfast and dinner with the family – a total immersion in the culture as well as the language.

◆ Language Schools

Below are listed some of the many schools currently offering courses in Costa Rica. Prices start as low as $200 per week, including home stays.

In San José

Forester Instituto Internacional, Los Yoses San José *(☎ 506/2225-3796, fax 2225-9236, www.fores.com)*. Professional school in a trendy neighborhood that still houses several embassies.

Intensa, Los Yoses San José *(☎ 506/2225-5009, fax 2253-4337, toll-free in the US 866/277-1352, www.intensa.com)*. As the name suggests, it offers intense study as well as one-on-one classes. Optional full day.

Instituto de Español, Guadalupe, San José *(☎/fax 506/2280-6622, www.professionalspanish.com)*. Intensive learning, quality teaching staff, two-for-one special.

Ilisa, San Pedro *(in US, ☎ 800/454-7248; in CR, ☎ 506/2280-0700, fax 2225-4665, www.ilisa.com)*. Highly regarded.

Costa Rican-North American Cultural Center, Barrio Dent and also in Sabana Norte *(☎ 506/2207-5000, fax 2224-1480, www.cccncr.com)*. Spanish courses and access to many cultural affairs.

Instituto Británico, Los Yoses *(☎ 506/2225-0256, fax 2253-1894, www.institutobritanico.co.cr)*.

Costa Rican Language Academy, Barrio California, San José *(in the US ☎ 866/230-6361, in CR 506/2280-1685, www.spanishandmore.com)*. What could be better than learning to speak with your dance partner? They offer cooking, too!

Centro Linguistico CONVERSA, San José *(in US, ☎ 888/669-1664, in CR, ☎ 506/2221-7649, www.coversa.net)*. Also a campus in Santa Ana in the foothills.

University of Costa Rica, San Pedro *(☎ 506/2207-5634, www.spanishclasses.ucr.ac.cr/)*. Eighty-hour course taught by the professional staff at the School of Philology and Literature. University ID, library privileges and cultural activities.

In Escazú

Language and International Relations Institute (ILERI), Escazú *(☎ 506/2289-4396, fax 2228-1687, ilerist@sol.racsa.co.cr)*. Cooking and dance too.

Lisa Tec B&B Language School *(near Cariari Golf Course, ☎ 506/2239-2894, fax 2293-2894)*. Not exactly in Escazú, but a tranquil language school with golf.

In Heredia

Intercultura, Heredia, Av 4, Calle 10, *(in the US ☎ 866/978-6668, in CR 506/2260-8480, fax 2260-9243, www.spanish-intercultura.com)*. Complete offerings including Latin dance, activities and volunteer opportunities. Once-a-month classes at Jacó beach.

Pura Vida Institute, Heredia *(in the US ☎ 866/490-0559, in CR 506/2265-3149, www.puravidalanguageinstitute.com).* Offers academic credit courses.

Instituto Profesional de Educación, Heredia, also in Liberia & Guanacaste *(☎ 506/2238-3608, fax 2238-0621, www.learnspanishcostarica.com)*.

Rural & Beach Schools

Centro Panamericano de Idiomas, 125 meters/411 feet east of cemetery in San Joaquín de Flores, outside of San José *(☎ 506/2265-6036, www.cpi-edu.com)*. Homestays and volunteer programs. Also in Monteverde and Flamingo Beach.

Rancho de Español, Alajuela *(in the US ☎ 978/633-7500, in CR ☎/fax 506/2438-0017, www.ranchodeespanol.com)*. Quiet, small.

Spanish Language and Environmental Protection Center (SEPA), San Isidro del General *(☎ 506/2770-1457, fax 2771-5586, www.spanish-school-costarica.com)*. It's located in a non-tourist area, so it's a real immersion experience.

Montaña Linda, Orosi *(☎ 506/2553-3640, fax 5233-1292, www.montanalinda.com)*. School and hostel in beautiful Orosi. You can trade four-week Spanish course for teach English.

Escuela D'Amore, Manuel Antonio, Quepos *(☎/fax 506/2777-1143, www.escueladamore.com)*. The school of love? Hmm.

Horizontes de Montezuma, Montezuma Beach *(☎/fax 506/2642-0534, www.horizontes-montezuma.com).* Just gorgeous.

Sports

Costa Ricans enjoy sports in their daily lives: kids and adults play basketball, soccer, a little baseball, and swim. Costa Rican sisters Sylvia and Claudia Poll, world-class swim competitors, train in San José. Sylvia won the country's first medal, silver, in 1990. Then in Atlanta, her younger sister Claudia won a gold medal at the Olympics. The country went crazy with pride! Bullfighting is pretty much con-

fined to holiday celebrations except in Guanacaste, which is cattle country.

◆ Soccer

But *every* Tico is a soccer – *fútbol* – fan. Soccer is the national sport, with 12 teams in the Primera División that play every Sunday and Wednesday night during the season from December to May/June. Lately, Costa Rica has done very well in international matches. In 1990 the national team advanced to the second round of the World Cup in Italy by beating Scotland and Sweden.

Happily for us, the soccer rivalry between the United States and Costa Rica is heating up, especially after close and physical matches in qualifications to World Cup 2006. World Cup competition takes place every four years and Costa Rica and the US are in the same region, perennially fighting to qualify for the three limited spots against powerful Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala and several Caribbean islands, such as Jamaica and Trinidad-Tobago, who also field good teams.

We attended a 2002 World Cup qualifying match between the US team and the Ticos (Costa Rica won) at the Saprissa Stadium. At the end, every taxi and bus was jammed with celebrating fans, so we had to walk back to town through a gauntlet of flag-waving *futból* fanatics. Despite our American flag shirts, Tico fans proved themselves good-natured winners. If you like soccer, get thee to a stadium to experience a level of enthusiasm that goes off the scale!

Money Matters

Currency in Costa Rica is the colon (plural is *colones*), which floats against the almighty dollar. You can change dollars in banks (bring your passport) or stores, which accept them at their own exchange rate, sometimes better, sometimes worse than the official exchange. When purchases are small it hardly matters. Canadians, Europeans and Brits should convert their cash into US dollars first, as they are more common and easier to exchange while

in Costa Rica. Hotel exchange rates are rarely as good as the banks or even some stores who convert money as a sideline.

Traveler's checks are falling out of favor with the proliferation of ATMs. Stick your card in and select the desired amount of colones; your only fee is any ATM charge that may apply. We use this method so we don't have to carry around more cash than we need. Another reason checks are being seen less frequently is because they are often changed at a lower rate than cash in Costa Rica.

If you change dollars or get an advance on your credit card in a bank, bring a copy of your passport for identification. For some reason, Costa Rican banks, and therefore most merchants, prefer VISA charge cards, although MasterCard is are accepted almost everywhere. Recently, many of the US bank charge cards, including ours, added a percentage service charge for foreign exchange purchases. In other words, the $100 you charged on a credit card for your hotel now costs you $100+. Check with your card company for their rules. If you figure out a way to get around it, let us know.

◆ Tipping

We tip by North American standards – $2-2.50 per night for cleaners in hotels and $1 per large bag carried by bellhops. Taxi drivers get no tip as they include it in the rate. Remember to negotiate; few taxis have meters, or *marias*. (Also, seatbelt use in cars and taxis is required by law but is uncommon except for us gringos. Use them – you won't regret it.)

Guides, many of them college-educated naturalists, should be tipped as generously as you feel they're worth – they live almost exclusively on tips. Many restaurants automatically add a 10% tip, *propina*, to the bill. If we had good service, we tip another 10%.

◆ Gambling

Many of the larger hotels offer gambling casinos with slot machines and gaming tables. The Gran Hotel has a small casino and the huge pink Hotel Del Rey (Av 1 and Calle 9) has one of the more popular casinos, with a sideshow of middle-aged "fishermen" in Hawaiian shirts and young ladies of the night. The casinos in the Aurola Holiday Inn and Barceló Amon serve free buffets for gamblers, while the

Gran Hotel and Del Rey will feed you at your table. On several slow evenings we've played blackjack with a one-dollar minimum, feeling rich if we won 5,000 colones and saying, well it's only $10, if we lost. Remember, the house always wins. "Rommy" is a name for blackjack, and "Tute" is a kind of poker.

Safety & Crime

The most common causes of death and injury among tourists are car accidents and accidental drowning, so be careful.

Before we list all the precautions you can take to avoid difficulties on your vacation, we will say that Costa Rica is generally a safe destination, without the overwhelming problems that plague poorer nations. However, it would be naive to think that crime doesn't exist or that it's not increasing at an alarming rate. The murder in 2000 of two female American students, shot and killed in a car-jacking, brought the increase in crime to the attention of US travelers. Two perpetrators were caught and convicted, but travelers began to realize that Costa Rica has a growing crime problem. Theft and strong arm robberies are a constant concern everywhere, but especially in San José, Quepos and Limón.

COMMON-SENSE PRECAUTIONS

- Never leave valuables in your car, not even in the trunk, as rental cars are obvious to thieves.
- Never leave valuables unattended on the beach.
- Be cautious about strangers too eager to help you find a taxi, a hotel, fix a flat tire, show you the way, or carry bags.
- For the police, ☎ 911.
- Follow common-sense rules about not carrying a lot of money around.
- Leave flashy jewelry and watches home. Lock valuables in the hotel safe and zip your camera bag up tight.
- Stay out of seedy or deserted areas, such as the Coca-Cola, at night, especially in larger cities. (The Coca-Cola area, named after a bottling plant that has long gone, is around Calles 14-18, Av 1 and 3, near the central *mercado* in San José. It has an important bus terminal. Relatively safe during the day, pickpockets and muggers have been known to target tourists and Ticos here at night.)

In late 2005, the famous puppet, Topo Gigo, was stolen from the airport when its owner was in San José to sponsor an anti-crime program. Authorities will have to reduce crime or risk a loss of tourism.

Men on their own are also vulnerable. We've heard of teams of two young men and a lookout putting men in a chokehold until they pass out. We met a college-age student to whom this happened on the pedestrian walk, so think with your elbows!

Inventive thieves have been known to target rental cars by giving the tires a slow leak just as the customer leaves the airport. They follow targets down the highway and, when the unsuspecting victim pulls over, rob them. If you get a flat under these circumstances, keep driving to a public area.

Don't get high or drunk in public, where you become very vulnerable. As this book went to press, news came out that a man was murdered in a Quepos nightclub. Please remember that drinking and drugging can have terrible consequences.

Despite this disheartening litany of possible crimes, we can't say enough about every day Costa Ricans – they are hardworking, sincere, helpful, caring and very honest. With a few precautions, your chances of being a crime victim are very small.

◆ For Women Travelers

Women traveling alone or in pairs are not uncommon in Costa Rica and rarely encounter extraordinary problems. Stay out of situations where you are clearly vulnerable, such as getting drunk in a bar, hitchhiking, or walking home alone at night through an unfamiliar area. Sex crimes are relatively rare in Costa Rica, but a touch of machismo in men is alive and well. Don't be shocked to be called a *macha*, meaning a blond or light-skinned girl, by men on the street or ones passing in cars. It can be annoying, but don't be offended by what they think is good-natured teasing. It is hilarious to hear lines such as *Que curvas y yo sin frenos*, which translates to "What curves and me without brakes!" You have to admit that it's more creative than "Come here often?"

Feminism is also very much a part of modern Costa Rica. Women's cooperatives are springing up around the country, such as the one in Monteverde. Contemporary, educated Ticas stand up for themselves and don't tolerate macho men very well. But *piroperos*

(men who make remarks in public) are a part of the Latin culture that is dying a very slow death.

Health, Special Concerns

Costa Rica is the most modern and sanitary country of the Central American isthmus, so it presents few health worries. No shots are required, but if you're traveling on to more remote sections of Central America such as Guatemala, Panama, El Salvador or Honduras, a vaccination against hepatitis A is strongly recommended. Contaminated water is the common source; a shot of immune globulin gives adequate temporary protection. A doctor friend of ours, who has vacationed in Central America for the past 25 years, recommends a hepatitis vaccine to all travelers regardless of where they go in the world – Cartago or Copenhagen.

Outside of San José we drink bottled water to avoid intestinal infections. But nothing offers fail-safe prevention of *tourista* (gastric distress) – not even bottled water. Its symptoms, which mimic salmonella poisoning, may include any or all the following: nausea, diarrhea, vomiting, stomach cramps and low-grade fever.

If we're in a budget hotel, the first thing we do when we start feeling bad (and it comes on very quickly) is upgrade to a hotel with air-conditioning and a comfortable bed. A couple of aspirin and plenty of sleep are called for. If we suffer frequent diarrhea and stomach cramps, we take the recommended dose of Imodium AD. Drink plenty of bottled water or Coca-Cola with lime or, in severe cases, hydrating fluids such as Pedialyte, available at a local drugstore. Then we crank up the air-conditioner, curl up and go to sleep. We repeat the Imodium if the diarrhea returns. In about 24 hours we're usually feeling well enough to get back out and enjoy ourselves again – with some reservations.

If you're feeling really bad, have your hotel call a doctor. Don't be shy about it. It's better to be safe than sorry.

If you've had a bout of *tourista*, you may still feel a little weak, so take it easy and don't over-exert yourself. For a few days you may also experience mild stomach cramps after eating. Eat light and cut out liquor and hot spices.

The US Public Health Service does not recommend taking any prophylactic medicines beforehand, but there are other ways to aid in prevention. We theorize that much of the bacteria that gives prob-

lems can be eliminated with frequent hand washing. The sensory delights of Costa Rica include touching new things, so a thorough hand scrub every chance you get is a good idea. You should have a fair number of chances because many restaurants offer a sink right in the dining room and it's considered polite to wash before eating.

◆ Other Health Concerns

Although getting sick is a prime concern of tourists, drowning is a major cause of death. Be extremely wary of rip tides when swimming on either coast. There are few lifeguards on the beaches here. A rip tide is like an underwater river pulling you out to sea. If you get caught in one, don't panic. Swim parallel to shore until out of its grip.

Another worry of tourists is snake bites. Although Costa Rica has a large number of poisonous snakes, most tourists aren't in such wild areas that they're in danger. The worst offender is the fer-de-lance, or *terciopelo* in Spanish, a particularly aggressive snake with a very poisonous bite. Stay on the path, wear leather boots in the wild, and go with a guide.

If you should have a severe medical problem, most hotels will arrange a visit to the clinic or will have an English-speaking doctor make a house call.

Dengue fever outbreaks (high fever and aches) have occurred in the past, spread by a daytime mosquito, and should be treated promptly. Use mosquito repellent in rural areas to aid in prevention. If you have any health problems after your return from Costa Rica, it may be wise to consult a physician.

You might also check with your medical insurance company to see if they cover expenses outside of the country. Most do, but very few will pay for emergency medical evacuations, sometimes called air ambulances. A list of companies that provide travel medical insurance can be found on the web at travel.state.gov/medical.html.

◆ Travelers with Disabilities

Unfortunately, few Costa Rican buildings, walks, curbs, buses or bathrooms are wheelchair-accessible according to ADA accessible standards, so travelers with physical limitations may have a hard time getting around. Even the terrain is challenging with many hills. However, things are improving daily; for instance: Turrialba town has just ramped its sidewalks and made the bus terminal wheelchair

accessible. So there's no reason not to visit Costa Rica in a wheelchair. Down in San Isidro, Monic Chabot runs IIDC *(Instituto Internacional de Desarrollo Creativo, ☎ 506/2771-7482, www.empowermentaccess.com)*, where she offers personalized itineraries for physically challenged travelers. She speaks English, French and Spanish, and with her years of experience can answer almost any question. She also rents rooms in her B&B. A Tico agency that specializes in day tours for those with special needs is Vaya con Silla de Ruedas, in San Pedro *(☎ 506/2454-2810, www.gowithwheelchairs.com)*.

◆ Prostitution

Prostitution is legal in Costa Rica but did not get much publicity – good or bad – until recent worries surfaced about the underground growth of "sex tourism," especially involving minors. Local and national authorities do not want the bad reputation or the social problems that go with that kind of tourism and organized trips for sex are strongly discouraged. Prosecutors crack down very hard on underage exploitation and in 2001 the first American was arrested for just that. He wasn't the last.

Most prostitutes work out of select clubs, bars or escort services and remain relatively low key unless you're looking for them. Even then, women wait to be approached and are not generally forward or aggressive. They are supposed to have a health card certifying recent medical check ups. Women from other countries have come for the money and some of the working Ticas have taken up the trade because of a lack of decent jobs available in Costa Rica's sluggish economy. Homosexual prostitutes also work out of certain bars, and many transvestites stand on street corners late at night.

Regular cautions go to anyone who gets involved. Some robberies have been associated with the trade – especially with men who drink – and some streetwalkers have tested positive for HIV. If you indulge, use condoms and care.

Communications

The telephone service in Costa Rica is very good. Even so, cell phones are ubiquitous. You'll see them attached to the belts of men and women everywhere, probably because the phone company (ICE) takes such a long time to install land lines.

◆ Phone Calls

Early in your stay it is a good idea to get a phone card that will enable you to make calls from public telephones. You'll find it especially handy in case of an emergency. Cards – called *tarjetas telefonicas* – are sold in units of 500, 1,000, or 3,000 colones at lots of little stores known as *pulperías*. There's a computer chip inside them that keeps track of your monetary credit. In very rural areas, where there are no public phones, you can often phone within Costa Rica from a store or hotel and they'll charge you (not a lot) by the connection time.

To reach the US or Canada directly, dial 001, then the area code and number. To charge with a calling card, dial: AT&T, ☎ *0800/011-4114,* MCI, ☎ *0800/012/2222, or* Sprint, ☎ *0800/013-0123.* For international collect calls, dial 175; local directory assistance, 113; or international directory assistance, 193.

If you plan to call home a lot, consider buying a "Servicio 199" card from the local telephone company office as it has lower international rates than your American phone service. With these you can dial home directly.

To call Costa Rica from the US, dial 011, plus the 10-digit number (all Costa Rica numbers begin with 506). This is an international call.

◆ Getting On-Line

Internet connections are available at a fair number of San José area Internet cafés and in a few hotels. Outside of San José you'll find cyber café connections in tourist areas, college towns or larger cities. However, in every post office, large or small, there is always at least one computer hooked up to the Internet. Pay in advance for a card with a set amount of time from the postal counter and sign on using the code on the card. It's a way many students in poorer rural areas are able to be a part of the cyberspace generation.

Just in Case

◆ Credit Card Issues

VISA, the country's most popular card, can be reached at ☎ *001-800-847-2911* in the States, or try their local numbers*:* ☎ *506/2224-2631 or 506/2224-2731.* MasterCard and American Express local office is in Credomatic at ☎ *506/2257-4744, 506/2257-0155.* To get an English speaker, ask for their 24-hour *servicio extranjero*.

◆ Costa Rica Tourist Board

The most popular satellite office of Costa Rica's Tourist Board, or ICT, is under the Plaza de Cultura, Calle 5 between Av Central and Av 2, next to the Gold Museum. Call them at ☎ *506/2223-1733* or try dialing 192. The out-of-the-way main office is located at the eastern end of the Juan Pablo Segundo Bridge in the former CINDE building *(☎ 506/2299-5800)* in La Uruca. Clearly identified Tourist Police have been re-introduced to the streets in major tourist destinations. They speak English and are there for serious problems or just to ask directions.

◆ Emergencies

Dial 911 and you should get an English-speaking operator.

Crimes should be reported to the Judicial Investigative Police in San José, ☎ *506/2295-3640*, or, if you're in the country, ask for the nearest Guardia Rural. To complain about corruption or government abuse, phone the Ombudsman's Office at ☎ *800-258-7474*.

In the event of a traffic accident, call your rental company first; most have 24-hour help numbers. When in San José call the Policia de Transito at ☎ *506/2222-9330*. Do not move your car until an officer arrives, even if you are blocking traffic. You probably also have to phone the National Insurance Institute, ☎ *800/800-8000*, if your rental company doesn't do it for you.

To reach the Fire Department, dial 911.

In the event of a medical emergency, call the Red Cross Ambulance service by dialing 911 or 128. Private flight and ambulance service: *506/2286-1818.* This is a pay-per-use emergency service.

HOSPITALS	
San José	
Mexico Hospital	☎ 506/2232-6122
San Juan de Dios Hospital	☎ 506/2257-6282
Calderon Guardia Hospital	☎ 506/2257-7922
Metropolitan Area	
Max Peralta Hospital, Cartago	☎ 506/2550-1999
San Rafael Hospital, Alajuela	☎ 506/2440-1333
San Vicente de Paul, Heredia	☎ 506/2261-0091
Private San José Hospitals & 24-Hour Pharmacies	
Clínica Católica	☎ 506/2283-6616
Hospital CIMA San José (pharmacy)	☎ 506/2208-1000 ☎ 506/2208-1080
Clínica Bíblica	☎ 506/2257-5252 (ext. 2 for Express Service, San José)

◆ Embassies

UNITED STATES: In Pavas, west of downtown San José, ☎ 506/2519-2000, 506/2220-3127 (emergency), wwwusembassy.or.cr.

CANADA: Oficentro Ejecutivo La Sabana, Edificio #5, Sabana Sur, ☎ 506/2242-4400, www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/sanjose.

GREAT BRITAIN: Paseo Colon between 38 and 40, San José, ☎ 506/2258-2025, www.embajadabritanica.com.

FRANCE: Near the Indoor Club, Carreta a Curridabat, ☎ 506/2234-4167, www.ambafrance-cr.org.

GERMANY: Near Casa de Dr Oscar, Arias, Rohrmoser, ☎ 506/2232/5533, www.embajada-alemana-costarica.org.

NETHERLANDS: Oficentro Ejecutivo La Sabana, Edificio #3, Sabana Sur, ☎ 506/2296-1490, www.nethemb.or.cr.

ISRAEL: Edificio Centro Colon, 11th Floor, Paseo Colon between 38 and 40, San José, ☎ 506/2221-6444, http://sanjose.mfa.gov.il.

ITALY: Calle33, between 8 and 11, Los Yoses, ☎ 506/2234-2326, www.ambitcr.com.

SPAIN: Calle 32, Paseo Colon and Av 2, San José, ☎ 506/2222-1933, embajadade.costarica@anit.es.

SWITZERLAND: Edificio Centro Colon, 11th Floor, Paseo Colon between 38 and 40, San José, ☎ 506/2232-0052, embajadada.costa.rica@thenet.ch.

Handy Hints

This mishmash of advice should make your vacation easier and more fun. Also included are some idiosyncrasies of Ticos and gringos in Ticolandia.

- Museums are closed on Mondays, so plan your visits accordingly.
- Ticos don't use street numbers. Instead, they use directions such as "100 meters south of the Coca-Cola." It doesn't matter that the Coke plant closed decades ago and is now a bus station. Directions are getting a bit better, but there is still the occasional "20 meters west of where they burned the dead dog," whenever that was.
- Instead of replying to *gracias* (thank you) with the more common expression in Latin America, *de nada* (for nothing), Ticos acknowledge that favors aren't always worth so little; consequently they respond *con gusto* – with pleasure.
- Friends informally greet each other with *maje* (MA-hey), which pretty much means an affectionate, "hey, stupid."
- The English-language weekly newspaper, *Tico Times*, comes out every Friday and is distributed to main tourism areas around the country. It's updated weekly on-line at www.ticotimes.net. Great websites for concise daily news is www.amcostarica.com and www.insidecostarica.com. You can sign up for with them for daily bulletins.
- Spanish and English are spoken by most of the people who live on the Caribbean side of Costa Rica.
- Ticos often drink beer with ice. The English really hate that.
- Although MasterCard is accepted most places, and American Express accepted in large hotels, VISA credit cards are preferred in Costa Rica. ATMs (*cajero automatico*) are a great way to get cash without waiting in line.

- Tiny restaurants or sandwich shops are called *sodas*.
- A title of respect (and in many cases, affection) used frequently in Costa Rica is *don* for men and *doña* for women, instead of *señor* or *señorita*.
- Latin music radio stations pound out salsa and merengue, which is often heard playing on buses and in taxis. But you'll find an all-English station at 107.9 FM. Rock 'n roll, of course. Super Radio at 102.3 plays oldies with a daily Beatles hour at 4 pm. Jazz can be heard on 99.5, and 1960s and 70s rock is found at Punto Cinco, 103.5. Intellectual talk is hard to receive at 101.3. Classical stations include 96.7. Radio Nacional offers classical and eclectic soft music at 101.5 FM.
- Off-season is the rainy "green" season during the North American summer. Best deals for hotels or tours are during this time. We like it because the warm rains keep everything green and because we're cheapskates at heart.
- Musmanni is a country-wide chain of bakery/sandwich shop/ice cream parlors that open early, close late, and are a great source of inexpensive and filling goodies.
- Pharmacies are a good source for medical advice or doctor referrals, and pharmacists are very helpful in suggesting medications. Prescription drugs are generally cheaper than in the States. Look for a green cross in the window or on the sign.
- Many North Americans come down to Costa Rica for cosmetic surgery and dental work, which costs about half as much as it does in the US. We used Prisma Dental (☎ *506/2291-5151, www.cosmetics-dentistry.com*) in Rohmoser for cosmetic work and were very pleased.
- Never leave valuables in your parked car, even in your trunk, if you can help it. Don't leave your purse on the seat with the window down while driving, as pickpockets have been known to run by and grab. Thieves have been known to poke long sticks through windows of ground-floor accommodations to hook valuables left in sight.
- On a hike in the rainforest or just in nature, it's important to avoid snake bite. While in the woods, always walk with your head down and eyes forward – especially at night. Stay on the path,

wear high leather or rubber boots, and go with a guide. No sandals or canvas sneakers in the woods.

- To help keep unwelcome critters such as small scorpions at bay, do not leave your clothes or knapsack on the floor, Also, be sure to shake out your shoes before putting them on.
- Bring lots of one-dollar bills to use for tips. Be generous to guides and service workers, as they depend on tips for a living.
- Be cautious about strangers too eager to help you find a taxi, a hotel, fix a flat tire, show you the way, or carry your bags, etc. If you're in a rental car and have just visited an ATM, be suspicious if you get a flat tire. Thieves have been known to puncture tires and, when they stop to help, rob you. Keep driving until you get somewhere public, and ignore anyone who stops to help (except the police).
- The expression, *pura vida*, which translates as "pure life," is Costa Rica's unofficial motto. Throw up your hands and say *pura vida*, and it means, "That's life in Costa Rica."

Costa Rica

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San José

Nestled high in the Central Valley (1,253 meters/3,770 feet), between green volcanic mountain ranges, San José, a metropolitan city of one million plus people, orients east and west, surrounded by suburbs that cling to the foothills. Southwest of the city, the upscale town of Escazú is home to the largest population of North Americans living in Costa Rica.

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Unlike other Central American capitals, San José is not very colonial, although the heart of the historic center features several beautiful old buildings. It didn't become a decent-sized city until relatively late in the 1800s, long past the colonial era, and had a modern building boom in the 1950s and 60s. Because of its economic success from coffee exports, San José became the second city in the Americas to install electricity (1884). At its heart are the National Theater, Plaza de la Cultura, Parque Central, the Cathedral and Gold Museum, which are centered in a four-block area with a long pedestrian-only shopping walkway bisecting the middle of downtown.

San José is a very cosmopolitan capital with many welcoming qualities, including near-perfect weather. The temperature is fairly consistent between 70 and 75°F. Occasional cold fronts call for a jacket or sweater at night. The rainy season, when late afternoons and evenings bring showers, lasts from May to October, *mas o menos*.

As the cultural heart of the nation, San José is home to several theater groups, excellent museums, parks, a national symphony, cinemas and universities. It is also host to nightclubs, casinos, discos and fine restaurants.

On the down side, the city is often crowded, dirty, noisy, ugly and disagreeable. It may take some getting used to – some people absolutely hate it, but the longer you stay, the more San José grows on you.

San José Suburbs & Neighborhoods
to Int'l Airport & Alajuela
to Heredia
to Braulio Carrillo Nat'l Park, Limón & Guápiles
MORAVIA
to San Isidro de Coronado
Interamerican Highway
1
Río Torres
TIBAS
URUCA
San José Periférica
Guápiles Highway
GUADALUPE
SABANILLA
Tobias Bolaños Airport
TOURNÓN
ROHRMOSER
to Santa Ana
Prospero Fernandez Hwy
LA SABANA
AMÓN
Av 9
ESCALANTE DENT
Paseo Colón
Av 10
Av 2
SABANA SUR
Calle 3
LOS YOSES
SAN PEDRO
ESCAZÚ
N
Río María Aquilar
Calle Central
Río Tiribí
ZAPOTE
SAN SEBASTIAN
SAN FRANCISCO DE DOS RÍOS
CURRIADABAT
HUNTER PUBLISHING
39
HATILLO
San José Periferico
.8 MILES
.8 KM
DESAMPARADOS
to Tres Ríos & Cartago
ALAJUELITA
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San José horizon (Bruce & June Conord)

Orientation

Do you know the way to San José? Even if you do, it may be easier than finding your way around it. That's because Costa Ricans don't use street addresses. Instead, they use directions such as "100 meters south of the Coca-Cola." (The Coke plant closed and is now a bus station – you're supposed to know it was once there.) Good luck!

Because the neighboring town of San Pedro, home of the University of Costa Rica and Ulatina, is so much a part of San José's personality, we have included it in San José listings. It's a lively part of town, just east of the city limits along the main roadway connecting the upscale Los Yoses neighborhood, through student-friendly San Pedro, to curious Curridabat, and on to Cartago.

San José city itself is divided into various neighborhoods, *barrios*, such as Los Yoses, Amon, Otoya and Merced. Roads are in the typical Latin American grid pattern: streets, *calles*, run north and south, while avenues, *avenidas*, are oriented east and west. Bisected east and west by Av Central, *avenidas* to the north of Av Central bear uneven numbers, while those to the south are even. In the same way, Calle Central is the central north-south axis, with streets to the east using odd numbers and those to the west using even numbers. Look for street signs up on the corners of buildings.

For an overview of the city, take a half-hour tour on the Tico Tren (☎ *506/2226-1349)*, a faux train engine that pulls a sightseeing car. It was brought here by ship from Key West in 1968. The family-run tourist attraction is a familiar sight in San José. You can pick it up in front of the National Theatre (Gran Hotel) or Parque Central, or just flag it down as it passes. The fare is US $3. The Tico Tren runs weekends in the rainy season and nearly daily in the high season, except when Carlos Solano, its driver/owner, is engaged as a private tour guide (see page 112). Try to flag him down and say hello from us.

◆ A Walking Tour of San José

Start at Parque Central •7• (Av 2 between Calle Central & 2), the city's oldest park. Downtown parks are modest and generally unappealing as recreational attractions, but they are good gathering grounds, especially on Sundays. The central pavilion, donated by Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza, once housed a children's library. It features popular Sunday concerts.

Facing the park is the most important church in Costa Rica, the Metropolitan Cathedral •8•. Built in 1871 after the original was destroyed in an earthquake, the interior is expansive, with elegantly painted columns made of wood. The high altar is under an ornate cupola ceiling.

Across the street on Av 2 is the Melico Salazar Theater •6•, built in the 1920s and named after a famous Italian opera singer who liked Costa Rica so much he moved here in 1937. In addition to concerts and special events, it now hosts a folklore ballet. Stop at the box office for tickets *(☎ 506/2221-4952).*

East on Av 2 is the Gran Hotel •9•, set back from the street in a paved plaza. It features a small, popular casino, and its inside restaurant is quite good. But the outdoor Café Parisien – open 24 hours – is San José's best place to sit and eat or have a drink while the world passes by your table.

If there is one "must-see" site in San José it's the Teatro Nacional (National Theater, ☎ *506/2257-0863, wwwteatronacional.go.cr*) • 10•, next door to the Gran Hotel. Completed in 1894, at the height of Costa Rica's coffee and banana wealth, the theater is an ornate, spectacularly beautiful testament to a bygone era – a golden age of opulence. Its neo-classical exterior is impressive, but the interior ba-

1. Coca-Cola Bus Terminal
2. Bus for Alajuela & airport
3. Parque La Merced
4. Central Market
5. Children's Museum
6. Melico Salazar Theater
7. Parque Central
8. Metropolitan Cathedral
9. Gran Hotel
10. National Theater
11. Cultural Plaza (Gold Museum & Tourism Office)
12. Parque Morazár
13. Serpentario indoor zoo
14. Edificio Metálico (Metal School)
15. Parque España
16. National Cultural Center
17. Casa Amarillo
18. INS Building (Jade Museum)
19. Parque Zoologico Simon Bolivar
20. El Pueblo shopping complex
21. Parque Nacional
22. National Art & Culture Center
23. Democracy Plaza
24. National Museum (Fort Bellavista)
25. Criminology Museum
26. National Train Museum (Atlantic)

Teatro Nacional *(Sairen42)*

roque décor is breathtaking. The entrance lobby features Italian pink marble and 22- karat gold trim.

The theater's Viennese-style café is a charming place to have lunch, afternoon tea, or just coffee and dessert. Up the Carrara marble staircase to the theater's second story is Costa Rica's most famous painting (look up), *Una Alegoría*, by Milanese artist Aleardo Villa. Reproduced on the colorful five-colones bank note, Villa depicts an idealized coffee harvest with sacks of the *grano de oro* being loaded onto a sailing ship. Admission to tour the theater is about US $6 and worth every colon.

Plaza de la Cultura

To the side of the theater is the Plaza de la Cultura •11•. Because of its location along Av Central's pedestrian walkway, it has become the central meeting place in the downtown, often attracting street performers.

Below the plaza, under a curving arched roof, are the Gold Museum *(☎ 506/2243-4202, www.museosdelbancocentral.org)* and the Tourism Office (ICT). Tourist info is available Monday through Saturday, 9 to 5. The pre-Columbian gold museum is open Tuesdays through Sundays from 10 am to 4:30 pm. Admission for the impressively rich, 2,000-piece exhibit is around US $6. It's one of Central America's largest collections. Sorry, no photos, *☎ 506/2223-0528.*

Continue east another block on the pedestrian walk and turn left (north) on Calle 7 uphill toward Parque Morazán •14•. If you're into snakes, a quick detour on Av 1 leads to the Serpentario •15• indoor zoo, with our favorite creature, the Jesus Christ lizard. Head upstairs and follow your nose. Parque Morazán features a central gazebo where Sunday concerts are often held. On the far side of the park is the tall Aurola Holiday Inn, with a fancy casino on the top floor, and a great view at night. The Morazán area also has a couple of well-kown bars frequented by prostitutes. One of the more famous, Key Largo, is worth a look for its Caribbean Victorian mansion architecture, but you'll have to pay US $5 for a beer and a US $5 cover charge for men.

Parque Morazán (ArquiWHAT)

Cross Av 3 and 5 to the Edificio Metálico (Metal Building) •16•, a yellow elementary school designed by French architect Victor Baltard, who also did *Les Halles* in Paris. Cast of iron in Belgium in 1892, it was shipped overseas and assembled on the site. To its side is Parque España • 17 •, home to towering tropical shade trees, thick clumps of bamboo and an open-air market on Sunday.

Edificio Metálico

The tall building that overlooks the park and school is the National Insurance Institute, INS (*Instituto Nacional de Seguros*), which contains the fabulous Jade Museum • 20 •. It moved in 2006 to new quarters on the ground floor. Over 6,000 works of pre-Columbian art and jewelry, in jade and other precious stones, make up the world's largest collection. Unfortunately, some of the erotic carved stone phallic symbols were removed to allow more office space, but what remains should still bring a smile. Open Monday through Friday, 8:30 am-3:30 pm, Saturday, 9 am-1 pm. Admission, $4, ☎ *506/2287-6034, www.portal.ins-cr.com/Social/MuseoJade.* Admission $4.

Just up the hill on Av 7 is the Casa Amarillo •19 •, a grand yellow mansion that now houses Costa Rica's foreign ministry – and a piece of the Berlin Wall. In front President John F. Kennedy planted the large Ceiba tree when he founded the Alliance for Freedom in 1963.

Across the street is the fortress-like National Cultural Center, *Centro Nacional de la Cultura*, •18 •, converted from its use as the old National Liquor Factory. Coffee liqueur and Guaro (see page 73) used to be distilled here. Besides historical artifacts, it features an active art center, the Contemporary Art Museum (☎ *506/2257-9370*). Don't let its forbidding high walls discourage a visit. Open Tuesday-Saturday, 10 am-5 pm, with free admission on Sunday; US $3 at other times.

A quick jaunt into the Otoya Barrio up Calle 9 leads to Parque Zoologico Simon Bolivar •21•, the local zoo. Until a remodeling in 2000, this was a disgraceful and dirty little zoo, but it's been transformed into at least a more pleasant stop with enhanced landscaping and improved conditions for the animals. Good spot for kids. It's

set down in a hollow basin with thick vegetation and plenty of songbirds around.

Head south on 15 to the Parque Nacional • 23 •, San José's largest urban park. It's a popular place for students and strolling lovers under its tall tropical trees. Important statues include the 1856 National Warrior Monument, cast in Rodin's Paris studio, which commemorates the battle against William Walker. Also in the southwest corner is the statue of Juan Santamaría, the boy-hero who helped rout Walker's army. Farther east from the park is the National Train Museum • 28 • set in the old Atlantico train station of the line that once went to Limón.

Due south from the park, across Av Central, is the Plaza de la Democracia and the Museo Nacional • 26 • *(☎ 506/2257-1433, www.museocostarica.go.cr)*, housed in the historic old Fuerte Bellevista. Only in peace-loving Costa Rica would they name a mil-

Fuerte Bellevista

itary installation "Fort Beautiful View." The Plaza in front has a good flea market daily that's especially big on weekends. The old yellow Castilian fort was constructed in 1887 and used as the nation's military headquarters until the abolition of the armed forces in 1948. Notice the side walls and look up at the balustrades to see all the gun

Painted oxcart (Bruce & June Conord)

shot holes around the gun slits, evidence of the serious nature of the 1948 Civil War. A stroll around the fort's interior, towers and old jail shows the conditions faced by turn-of-the-century soldiers. Located in the central courtyard you'll find a good example of the traditional brightly painted oxcarts (*carretas*), as well as several varied-size, mysterious stone spheres – made by a long-forgotten people in the southern zone. Entrance is on Calle 17 between Av Central and Av 2. Open Tuesday through Sunday, 8:30 am-4:30 pm; $5 for adults, children under age 10, free. Hungry? Nearby is the restaurant, Ay Sofya, on Av Central & Calle 21.

Go 2½ blocks south on Calle 17, which brings you to the Court Administration buildings, specifically the Organismo de Investigación Judicial, between Av 6 & 8. What better place for a Criminology Museum *(☎ 506/2295-3850)* – a fascinating graphic history of crime in Costa Rica – and perfect for people like us who look for more uncommon things to do and see. Free.

◆ Other Downtown Sights

The Children's Museum • 5 • (☎ *506/2258-4929; www.museocr.com.)*, Museo de Niños, is located in a huge converted old fort that once served as the city's prison. This large yellow fortress with crenellated walls and towers is at the north end of Calle 4, on a hill above

the Río Torres. It has free, hands-on interactive exhibits and activities. Art exhibitions and concerts for adults in the new National Auditorium are also held here. Open Monday-Friday, 8 am-4:30 pm, weekends, 9:30 am-5 pm. Adults, $3, children under 18, $2.

The post office, *Correo*, is another baroque building (on Calle 2, between Av 1 & 3). It is home to an interesting stamp museum. On the second floor and a bit of a challenge to find. Free admission.

Parque la Merced •3•, nicknamed Nico Park, in front of the Hospital San Juan de Dios, is where Nicaraguan nationals congregate. Overlooking it is the Iglesia de la Merced, Mercy Church. Damaged in the 1991 earthquake, the church boasts an Italian marble altar, magnificent stained-glass windows and a vaulted wooden ceiling.

At the west end of downtown, at the end of Boulevard Paseo Colon, lies the former airport that is now a large park called La Sabana. On weekends it's full of families, sports players, runners, exercisers, kite fliers, picnickers, ice cream vendors and more. It also contains the Costa Rican Art Museum *(☎ 506/2222-7155)*, housed in the former control tower. Open Tuesday-Sunday, 10 am-4 pm, weekends. Adults, $3, children free. Free admission to all on Sunday.

In the southwest corner of the park is the Natural Sciences Museum (☎ 5*06/2232-1306)*, in the old La Salle college building. It contains varied displays of zoology, archeology, geology and mineralogy, plus the only paleontology exhibit in the country. Open 8 am-4 pm, Monday-Saturday, 9 am-5 pm on Sunday. $3.

Last but not least are the two old cemeteries in Barrio San Bosco. Cemeterio General, on the south side of Av 10, Calles 22-28, contains the Italianate mausoleums and graves with sculptures of many Costa Rican artists, writers, politicians and coffee barons. Ask to see "La Novia," the tomb of Irene Mirlona Jiménez, who died at the altar in 1982y. Between Calles 18 & 20 is the Foreigners' Cemetery, which dates to the 1840s. Railway workers and immigrant entrepreneurs from Europe, North America and Arabia are interred here.

Adventures on a Shoestring

A number of things can be enjoyed in San José without paying an arm and a leg. Some are even free, such as the cemeteries and La Sabana Park (bring your sneakers just in case you join a game). Or you can wander around fruit and vegetable and flower markets or window shop in town *mercados* and the pedestrian walk in San José.

Children's Museum

Some museums offer free admission on Sundays – you can't beat that for a deal. There are also numerous band concerts in squares and parks; just walk up and listen. Professional concerts, such as the Symphonic, are a fraction of the cost of European or American performances.

One of our favorite budget adventures is just getting on a bus and going somewhere in a different neighborhood, or to nearby towns such as Heredia or Cartago. It's cheap and fun.

Orosí

◆ Hot Springs

Cool down in the natural spring swimming pools of Orosí by taking the bus to Cartago, then catching the Orosí bus. There are locker rooms and a restaurant. Orosí is a small town on the meandering

Orosí River, where the steep valley walls are lined with deep green coffee bushes. The view from the overlook just before the valley entrance is spectacular. This trip can be combined with visits to Cartago, Lankester Gardens (on the way), and the Orosí Valley overlook park. We can't think of a better way to spend a day.

The same type of attraction is Ojo de Agua in San Antonio de Belén, not far from San José. It features five swimming pools and a park for sports and picnics, plus a restaurant. Hourly buses from the Coca-Cola terminal, Calle 10, Av 4 & 6. Admission is about US $4.

The more famous Tabacon Hot Springs, along with Baldi Hot Springs, are located near Arenal Volcano (see page 193). They definitely warrant an overnight excursion.

◆ Road to Nowhere

We took a *Tico Times* reporter's advice for a cheap date and caught the public bus (US $2) to Bebedero, also marked "Vista de Oro," from Av 6 at Calle 14, just behind the Hospital San Juan de Dios. The bus runs through wealthy Escazú and up a steep mountain through rural suburbs of adobe and wooden houses, many with old oval brick ovens in their terraced gardens. It's a good way to look down on San José spreading through the Central Valley below you. The bus route ends in the middle of nowhere on the side of the mountain at a quiet church. Rather than just hang out until the bus was ready to return – if you do, be sure to get a front seat for the view – we walked down the dirt road to the side of the chapel and followed it downhill. We were rewarded with some stunning vistas of the countryside.

> AUTHOR NOTE: *If you follow in our footsteps, be aware this route takes a lot of them. Wear comfortable walking shoes.*

On either side of the road are verdant farms enclosed by "living fence posts" – tree branches or trunks that have been cut to post size and pounded into the ground, where they sprout roots in the rich soil and grow into new trees. Nearly halfway down the mountain is a small store, where you can stop for snacks and cold soda. Go just a bit farther and you reach a great little restaurant (Tiquicia, reviewed on page 146) that offers stunning views. You can also do this trip on a Saturday, the only day the eatery is open for lunch. This ex-

cursion could also be done in the early evening, which would allow you to have dinner at Tiquicia, overlooking the valley's twinkling lights. You'll need determination, a good flashlight and sure feet! At night, have the restaurant call a taxi for the ride to San José or Escazú. The walk from Tiquicia back to where we could finally catch a bus back to San José took us well over an hour. Huff and puff.

Day-Trips, Tours & Local Adventures

Whether you stay in San José or the surrounding suburbs or cities, the Central Valley affords plenty of adventures and side-trips. And that's before you head off to the beaches, volcanoes or rainforests. Much of Costa Rica's adventure and cultural destinations are within a day's drive, so we'll list only easy day-trips here. Overnight destinations are listed in their individual region's chapter.

Some attractions are best enjoyed on a tour, although several sites can be combined if you take a public bus or drive a rental car.

◆ Tour Companies

Full-Service Tour Companies

For a list of tour companies who make arrangements for your from the US, see page 24. Among the major local full-service tour companies offering day and overnight trips operating out of San José are Valle Dorado *(☎ 506/2228-9933, www.valledoradotours.com)* in Escazú; Horizontes *(☎ 506/2222-2022, www.horizontes.com)*; Costa Rica Sun Tours *(☎ 506/2233-6890, www.crsuntours.com);* Ecole Travel *(☎ 506-223-2240, www.ecoletravel.com)*, next door to 7th Street Books; and Green Tropical Tours *(☎ 506/2229-4192, www.greentropical.com)*, who offer a Los Juncos Cloud Forest hike daily; Centralamerica.com *(☎ 800/401-7337, CR ☎ 506/2221-3912, www.centralamerica.com)*; and Marbella Travel *(☎ 866/251-4461, CR ☎ 506/2227-0101, www.marbellatours.com).* See page 90 for specialized handicapped tours.

One-on-One Tours

And if you're looking for a more personalized experience, call Carlos Solano *(☎ 506/2226-1349)*. Carlos is a Costa Rican-American who lives in San José and has proven to be a very dependable, bilingual, personal guide; one who has worked for several VIPs. He

will drive you in his van or your rental car anywhere in the country and knows all the ins and outs. Carlos is distantly related to Juan Santamaría, the national hero, and his grandmother posed for a portrait that was printed on Costa Rican bills in the 1930s and 1940s. A reader also recommends Oscar Chavarria Mora *(☎ 506/8373-2736),* who speaks excellent English and will drive you in his car.

◆ Adventures in the Air

If you ever thought of being a bouncer, here's your chance: Tropical Bungee *(☎ 506/2248-2212, www.bungee.co.cr)* provides an inexpensive opportunity to bungee jump off the 90-meter/296-foot Río Colorado bridge, near Naranjo, into a deep gorge. The setting is close enough to San José that you'll have time to do several jumps in a day. Cost runs about US $65 for the first jump, and $30 for subsequent jumps. The steel bridge was built in 1948 and now sees mostly tractors and equipment going to and from surrounding farms. You go first; we'll watch.

A slightly less down-to-earth excursion is hot air ballooning with Serendipity Adventures *(in US & Canada, ☎ 877/507-1358, in CR ☎ 506/* 558-1000, www.serendipityadventures.com). Lift-off is very early in the morning. They pick you up from your hotel and drive you out to the lift-off location. Around US $900 for up to five people, or a special of about US $500 for two. It's a lot of money, but the trip of a lifetime. Serendipity also arrange tours for disabled travelers.

The Aerial Tram *(☎ 506/2257-5971, www.rainforesttram.com)* is a very popular day tour from San José. Located in a rainforest on the eastern edge of the Braulio Carrillo National Park (see page 334), the converted ski lift tram was developed and built in 1994 by Don Perry, a famous North American biologist who pioneered forest canopy research. It features a slow-moving, 90-minute trip in a cable car at various altitudes above the forest floor. A "naturalist" guide accompanies the group. The tram has opened an agreeable lodge for overnighters.

A common trip with tour groups is the Banana Tour of one of two Dole banana plantations in the Caribbean lowlands. Make arrangements for this intriguing educational trip with a local travel agent in your hotel or contact them directly *(☎ 506/2768-8683. www.bananatourcostarica.com).*

◆ Adventures on Horseback

In nearby Santa Ana, a country village with roadside veggie stands, you can horseback ride at La Caraña Riding Academy *(☎ 506/2282-6106, www.lacarana.com)* or Centro Equestre Valle Yos-Yo *(☎ 506/2282-6934)*.

◆ Adventures on Foot

We found the best and most convenient cloud forest hiking opportunities in the Los Angeles Cloud Forest Reserve in San Ramón. It receives far fewer visitors than Monteverde and is much closer to San José. Los Angeles offers unspoiled quiet and mystical misty paths up a mountain slope. Arrange this as a day-trip or overnight excursion with the Villablanca Hotel *(☎ 506/2461-0300, www.villablanca-costarica.com)*, located at the edge of the forest. The hotel is owned by the same people who own Si Como No in Manuel Antonio and has become mucho upscale now.

NOTE: For hiking in the forest, wear clothes that you don't mind getting dirty and bring some spares. Leather shoes or boots are best.

Consider hiking a historical path on a day-trip to Guayabo National Monument, 19 km/12 miles northeast of Turrialba. This is Costa Rica's most auspicious pre-Columbian archeological dig. Pleasant, natural and quiet, the area offers cobbled streets, ruined aqueducts, bridges and rocky building foundations that have been uncovered from an early indigenous settlement. It's a serene and completely untouristy attraction. See our write-up under *Turrialba*, page 162.

Café Britt Coffee *(☎ 506/2260-2748, www.cafebritt.com)* is lo-

Artifact from Guayabo

cated at the heart of the coffee *finca* (farm) area near Heredia. It features a multi-media show about coffee growing. Entertaining live actors walk with you around some growing coffee bushes. A coffee-tasting lesson is then held. The large gift shop features lots of coffee souvenirs, including a delicious coffee liqueur, and it has a pleasant little cafeteria serving typical Tico food. Britt Coffee is arguably Costa Rica's best (and most expensive) brand – but worth every penny. This tour is often combined with other area attractions.

A different coffee tour on a working farm is the Doka Estate *(☎ 506/2449-5152, www.dokaestate.com)* off the road from Alajuela to Poás. Their excellent roasted coffee, called Tres Generacions, is available on-line or by phone (toll-free) in the US *(☎ 877/789-3652)*. Near the Doka Estate is a cute B&B called Siempre Verde *(☎ 506/2449-5134)*. This small luxury hotel borders the estate's fragrant coffee fields.

La Paz Waterfall *(☎ 506/2482-2720, www.waterfallgardens.com)* is a pleasant natural wonder on the slopes of the Poás Volcano (admission about US $16) in Montaña Azul de Heredia. Not a single waterfall but a series of five powerful falls and cataracts that crash dramatically down a steep, heavily wooded gorge. You'll climb many precipitous steps along several paths next to the river. The orchid gardens attract scores of hummingbirds. There's also an indoor/outdoor buffet-style restaurant. La Paz, which means "Peace," is located six km/four miles north of Vara Blanca on the way to Poas Volcano.

Two fascinating and distinctly different semi-active volcanoes flank San José and both are not-to-be-missed day-trips. Poas Volcano (see page 173) rises into the clouds up from Heredia and Alejuela where the air is pure and cool and the scenery is memorable. To the west of San José, up from Cartago, lies Irazú Volcano (see page 154), a grand and majestic mountain that offers a spectacular drive up its slopes. Combine these with other attractions or destinations for unforgettable day trips. *Mucho gusto*.

Take a new luxury trip on the Tico Train *(☎ 506/2233-3311, www.americatraveler.com)*, which departs on weekends from Santa Ana at 7 am for Orotina. Once there, you can take on any number of local tours. Total time, 13 hours. Rail travel is in restored 1940s vintage cars, including a flatbed converted as an observation car. Round-trip cost is between US $60 and $85, depending on which tours you select in Orotina. A less involved trip leaves San José at 6:30 am to Caldera, where passengers can swim. US $25. The ticket office is located in the cavernous Ferrocarril Pacifico Terminal, Av 18 be-

tween Calle 2 and 4. A travel agent should also be able to book this for you.

InBio Parque *(☎ 506/2244-4790, www.inbioparque.org)* is an ambitious project that functions to categorize the bio-diversity of the country's eco-systems, as well as educate visitors about ecology. It's fascinating, but fairly pricey at about US $15. Ask to see the numerous trays of insects, which include a gold scarab beetle, made famous by Edgar Allan Poe. It's located between Heredia and Santo Domingo; take a taxi from San José.

Silver-throated tanager

In Costa Rica, birding has a low impact on the environment and offers a high degree of satisfaction. A huge number of native and migratory birds (870+ recorded species) call Costa Rica home, at least for a while each year. At La Selva Biological Station *(☎ 506/2766-6565)* near Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí (not to be confused with the better-known Puerto Viejo near Cahuita), over 400 bird species have been seen. Two other outstanding areas for migratory species are Caño Negro Wildlife Refuge in the north, and Palo Verde National Park in the northwest. Brilliantly colored toucans and scarlet macaws can be seen along the western shore from near Jacó at Carara National Park down to the Dominical area and over to Corcovado National Park, on Osa.

Dedicated birdwatchers should pick up *Birds of Costa Rica* by Gary Stiles and Alexander Skutch, Cornell University Press. You can listen at home to the sounds of Costa Rican nature with a stereo CD called the *Costa Rican Bird Song Sampler*, an audio guide to recognizing forest bird songs. Both are produced by David Ross at Cornell's Laboratory of Ornithology (www.birds.cornell.edu/lab_cds.html).

Costa Rica's Birding Club offers organized day and overnight birding trips *(☎ 506/2230-2258, http://crbirdingclub.tripod.com)*. If you're spending Christmas in Costa Rica (instead of staying home

and eating that other big bird), you can participate in the annual Christmas Bird Count by getting in touch with naturalist Richard Garrigues *(☎ 506/2293-2710, gonebirding@mailcity.com)*.

◆ Adventures on Water

Nothing means adventure more than whitewater rafting on one of Costa Rica's famous rainforest-fed rivers. It's the one trip we take every time we're in-country. Challenging curls and whirls of whitewater – rolling, roiling rapids – are enjoyed in six- to eight-person self-bailing rafts. These raft trips – offered by select safety-conscious tour operators – are good for everyone, from pre-teens to dexterous senior citizens (depending on the river levels). Several big river-rafting operators own their own lodges and also work with other adventure expeditions. These are: Costa Rica Expeditions *(☎ 506/2257-0766, www.costaricaexpeditions.com)*, the largest of its kind; Ríos Tropicales *(☎ 506/2233-6455, www.riostropicales.com)*; Adventuras Naturales *(US ☎ 800/514-0411, CR ☎ 506/2225-3939, www.toenjoynature.com);* and Exploradores Outdoors, (☎ *506/2222-6262, www.exploradoresoutdoors.com*).

Coast to Coast Adventures *(☎ 506/2280-8054, www.ctocadventures.com)* runs the most physically challenging adventure – a grueling, two-week race across Costa Rica each year. Trips combine mountain and road biking, hiking, climbing, rafting, swimming and much more.

The most popular rivers to raft during a day-trip from San José are the Reventazón (rah-vent-ti-ZON) and the Pacuare (pa-QUAR-ree). The former used to include Class IV & V rapids until a dam in Turrialba softened the river's currents. Today it features Class II, III and a few IV rapids. The Pacuare, however, offers spectacular scenery as it flows down through primary as well as secondary deep green rainforest with Class III and IV rapids. When you're not shooting rapids you can watch brilliant blue morpho butterflies drift by and jungle birds along the riverbank. If you take a two-day trip, you get to stay overnight at one of the two rustic luxury lodges owned by Adventuras Naturales and Ríos Tropicales.

The Sarapiquí is a more gentle raft float river strictly for beginners or birders. One-day tours offer breakfast and lunch and often combine the trip with a visit to the La Paz Waterfalls en route. Book with Costa Rica Fun Adventures *(☎ 506/2290-6015)* or with any of the other rafting companies.

Isla Tortuga

Most day-trips start at around US $75 per person, including transportation, breakfast and lunch. Other rivers rafted around the country include the Corbicí, General, Río Naranjo, Peñas Blancas, Río Bravo and Río Toro – proof that Costa Rica boasts more whitewater rapids per square mile than any other country in the hemisphere.

A pleasant day-long cruise on a catamaran to Isla Tortuga in the Gulf of Nicoya can be arranged with Calypso Tours *(☎ 506/2256-2727, www.calypsotours.com)*. A bus ride to Puntarenas and back, light breakfast, onboard drinks and lunch on the small island are included in the $100 fee.

Speaking of overseas, Cruise West *(☎ 888/851-8133, www.cruisewest.com)* has a fun, nine-day cruise route up and down the Pacific coast of Costa Rica and Coiba Island off Panama. An 11-night sail on one of their intimate luxury ships includes passing through the Panama Canal. Vessels carry 100 passengers in 50 ocean-view cabins. List prices in 2005 were US $2,000-3,000. If you're already in Costa Rica and tempted to sail, local Tico travel agents can book this for you.

Seven-night sailing yacht cruises are offered by Windstar Cruises *(☎ 800/258-SAIL, www.windstarcruises.com)*. Ships depart from Puerto Caldera, near Puntarenas, and sail to San Juan del Sur, Nicaragua, then down the Costa Rica coast as far south as Quepos.

If you are a serious diver or naturalist, a voyage into the Pacific to Coco Island, 535 km/327 miles offshore in the Pacific, could be the highlight of your trip. See page 281.

◆ Adventures for Children

There are many things kids can enjoy in Costa Rica. Anything to do with water comes to mind – see the swimming pools parks at Ojo de Agua and Orosi. But for other distractions, look to Pueblo Antiguo ("Old Town," open Fridays and weekends, ☎ *506/2231-2001*), two km/1.25 miles west of Hospital Mexico in La Uruca, on the way to the airport. In its 4.86 hectares/12 acres, it attempts to re-create Costa Rican life as it was between 1880 and 1930 in three sections: City, Coast and Country. Live actors display and explain crafts. Rides and fast food. Proceeds benefit the hospital, built in 1964 in response to the polio epidemic of the 1950s.

San José offers the Children's Museum and Bolivar Zoo, while Alajuela offers the Butterfly Farm and Ave Zoo (see *Alajuela* section for details).

Catch the Dulce Nombre de Coronado bus from Av 7, Calle Central, to the Clodomiro Picado Institute *(☎ 506/2229-0344)*. Here, kids can research snake venom and watch the staff extract it on Fridays at 2 pm. Ask the driver for the stop. Free.

The Tico Tren Trolley Tour (see page 102) is a fun half-hour ride around San José on a historic sightseeing trolley. The Tico Train Trip (see page 115) is a fascinating day-trip over the mountains to Puntarenas on a real train.

Tico Tren (Bruce & June Conord)

Shopping

Although never known for its indigenous crafts like those in Guatemala or Mexico, Costa Rica has generally high quality and reasonably priced goods. Coffee and coffee-related products such as coffee liqueur (yum), clothing, souvenirs, and art abound. Artisans in Guanacaste have recreated the delicate and delightful pre-Columbian Chorotega pottery style and make some wonderful pieces. Don't pass them by. Costa Rica's great woodcrafts are centered around the town of Sarchí. Leather craft has its creative home in the San José suburb of Moravia. If you don't make it to either place, local gift shops are full of leather items, belts, distinctive Costa Rican hats, woodcarvings, boxes, miniature furniture and even full-size furniture.

Work of Barry Biesanz

◆ Woodworks

Two notable North American artists have made an impact in wood design. Barry Biesanz works out of a new, open-to-the-public showroom and tourist attraction in Escazú *(☎ 506/2228-1811, www.biesanz.com)* creating exquisite hardwood bowls, intricate boxes and furniture. Jay Morrison, another ex-pat, specializes in creative custom hardwood furniture. Upscale San José shops feature these and other fine artists and craftsman. Try Atmósfera (Calle 5, Av 1), La Galería (Calle 1 Av, Central), Magia (Calle 5, Av 7) and Suraska (Calle 5, Av 3).

Huaca

◆ Silver & Gold

Silver jewelry is ubiquitous in Central America, but Costa Rica's unique contributions include reproductions of its pre-Columbian jewelry, often incorporating semi-precious stones and jade. Images of ancient deities, which resemble animals, are made into earrings, necklaces, pins, bracelets and pendants. They are called *huacas*, and the most famous is a frog-like image with flat feet. Our favorite, however, is a human-like figure that is anatomically correct. Great for people who rub their earrings. These figures are also available in gold, replicating those on show in the Gold Museum.

◆ Shops You'll Love

San José

Choices for shopping around San José range from downtown department stores and traditional marketplaces, *mercados*, to North American suburban indoor malls and member superstores such as Price Club. San Pedro has an upscale outlet mall now, but retail shops like those that once anchored the disappearing downtown areas in the United States still offer their wares on the pedestrian walkway of San José.

Downtown shops generally open around 9 am and close at 9 pm or later. Here are some of the best places to get a bargain and find some worthwhile things to lug home.

Hotel Don Carlos *(Calle 9 between Av 7 & 9, ☎ 506/2221-6767)*. Many of the better hotels have a modest gift shop, but people come to the Don Carlos Hotel just to buy things in their Annemarie Shop. It has a large selection (two floors) of jewelry, gifts, clothing, arts and crafts, and souvenirs. It's always well stocked, clean and modestly priced. Sells the earrings we mentioned above.

El Pueblo *(in Barrio Tournón, just across the Río Torres)*. This imitation colonial village – complete with a warren of narrow walkways and small shops – has an engaging charm all its own. El Pueblo (which means "The Town") is a complex that offers intimate dining in numerous restaurants and funky little bars, as well as shopping in art studios, craft shops, eclectic and gift stores. It even has a popular disco. We like it best in the evening when El Pueblo's narrow cobblestone plazas fill with people and it really feels as if you are in

Tomato vendor (Bruce & June Conord)

an old colonial village. Plus, we love the intimate bars (see our review in *Nightlife*, the next section). Don't miss it.

Mercado Central *(Calle 6 and Av Central)*. At the western end of the pedestrian walkway is the indoor complex of flea market-like stalls of the central market, a fixture here since 1880. Not large by Central American standards, it's still a fun place to wander. Flower stalls, clothing and shoe stores, gift shops, fabric vendors, butchers, restaurants, and much, much more. *Be wary of pickpockets in the narrow aisles.*

Farmer's Market. By 6 am on weekends, local farmers have set up tables at outdoor locations in the *barrios* of San José and small towns and villages throughout Costa Rica. An array of beat-up pickup trucks and trailers haul fresh fruits and vegetables into town for sale. These markets, called *ferias*, are wonderful. You can taste samples of exotic fruits and practice your Spanish. Besides fruit and veggies, you'll find a cornucopia of cheeses, honey, flowers and plants, aromatic herbs and spices, plus home-

Guzman Guitars (Bruce & June Conord)

made breads and tamales. In San José, the best Saturday *ferias* are in Pavas, Tibas and Escazú. On Sunday, head to Hatillo.

La Gloria *(Av Central walkway, between Calles 4 & 6)* is a department store right out of the 1950s or 1960s. Fabrics, clothes, household goods in an old-fashioned multi-level store.

Guzman Guitars *(Cinco Esquinas, Tibas)*. The Enrique Guzman family have been making acoustic guitars here since 1833, so if you are into music, a pilgrimage to the Guzman factory is a must. Spanish and classical guitars are their specialty and you can buy one – or

At the Mercado Nacional de Artesanías

order one custom made – in their small showroom. You can also ask permission to visit the factory in back and see guitars being made. Tell a taxi driver *cinco esquinas* (sinko eskeynas); it's not far.

Mercado de Artesanías Morazán *(Calle 7, half-block north of the Balmoral)*. A souvenir shop with lots of examples of one of Costa Rica's most notable crafts – woodworking. Some very finely crafted

Mercado Nacional de Artesanías

wood-working and original paintings. The selection is very good (masks, ceramics, T-shirts, etc.) and the prices reasonable.

La Casona *(Av Central and Calle Central)*. Open daily from 9 to 7, La Casona is San José's largest souvenir shop – warehouse-sized on two big floors, in the middle of downtown. It has a big selection. A good place to do comparison shopping, so start your shopping day here.

Galería Namu *(Av 7 & Calle 5, ☎ 506/2256-3412, www.galerianamu.com)*. This gallery presents a unique collection of art and boxes made of iron and rosewood, polished so highly that the grain is eye-popping.

Mercado Nacional de Artesanías *(Calle 11 behind the Soledad Church, ☎ 506/2221-5012, www.mercadoartesania.com)*. This large store is the "official" national arts and crafts gift shop in San José. It's just one block off Av 2 and features handcrafted gifts and souvenirs including beautiful

Eco-diablo mask from Galería Namu

crafts from the six surviving communities of Costa Rica's indigenous people. Owner Aisling French (who is Irish) searches out some of the best works from all over Costa Rica, including art produced by a San José outreach program that benefits local street children and orphans. Though her prices are a little higher than you may find in San José souvenir shops, you won't find these things elsewhere. Her masks are from the Huetar, Chorotega and Boruca cultures. The gallery also offers tours to indigenous communities, strongly recommended for a very unusual experience. Next door is Arte Latino, a gallery with paintings by local artists.

Oxcart in Sarchí

Books, maps and nature guides can be found at 7th Street Books *(Calle 7, Av Central & Av 1, ☎ 506/2256-8251)*, the largest English-language bookstore in town. It has a fair selection of travel guides, Latin American studies, literature, science and nature, reference books and posters. If they're not carrying our guides, please ask them to. The same goes for the other big bookstore in town that sells a wide assortment of English-language books, as well as used titles, Mora Books, in the Omni Building *(Av 1 and Calles 3 & 5).*

◆ Out of Town

Sarchí is the hometown of Costa Rica's craft industry (see page 180). A pleasant day-trip from San José, this Central Valley village features woodworking, furniture and traditional hand-painted oxcarts (ask for Joaquín Chaverri's oxcart factory) as well as a wide

selection of pottery, fine art, arts and crafts, gifts and souvenirs in its many shops.

Nightlife

Thinking nightlife? Think dancing. Ticos and Ticas love to *bailar* and they are so good, it's intimidating. Many clubs and bars have dance floors that become crowded with dancers of all ages, but it is by no means the only nightlife that San José has to offer. The Teatro Nacional *(☎ 506/2221-1329)*, the Teatro Melico Salazar *(☎ 506/2221-5341)* and the Auditorio Nacional *(☎ 506/2223-7003)* in the Children's Museum lay claim to much of the country's high culture. The symphony season runs from March through November (check with the box offices for scheduled performances). Modern dance troupes and small theatrical groups find audiences at several of the smaller theater stages around town.

The crown jewel of the art scene is the National Festival of Arts (www.festivalcostarica.org), featuring Tico talent in odd-numbered years and international performers and artists in even-numbered años. The festival runs every March, all month long, and boasts multiple venues around town.

But if it's not March and you're still looking for a good time, pick up the *Tico Times* and *La Nacion* (one of several Spanish-language daily newspapers) for listings of movies, music and mischief.

◆ Nighttime Hangouts

El Pueblo *(Barrio Tournón, just north of the downtown, go by taxi)* was built as an imitation Spanish colonial-era village. The buildings contain gift shops, art studios, funky little bars and intimate restaurants. As the big draw, El Pueblo features El Infinito, a popular dance/disco spot that offers varied musical styles on its three dance floors. No cover. We always merengue here because we can't salsa. Another good but small dance club in the complex is Cocolocos. Get info (in Spanish) on the bar scene at ☎ 506/2221/9434.

Our sentimental favorite, Tango Bar, is hidden among the nooks and crannies of El Pueblo's warren of shops and bars. Like a step back in time, you enter the evening-only, hole-in-the-wall tango bar through an old orange curtain. Inside, the walls are lined with black-and-white photos of ancient singers and musicians from Argentina's

golden age of tango. The bar maid is geriatric and so is the accordion player/singer, who performs tango standards and teary South American ballads. It's a wonderful place to sit and listen while you nurse a beer or mixed drink.

La Calle de la Amargura (Sairen42)

Dine in El Pueblo at La Cocina de Leña *($$-$$$)*, which specializes in typical Costa Rican food. Try the three-meat soup, *Olla de Carne Tipica*.

Across the street from El Pueblo is another happening dance/disco hall. La Plaza has a very large dance floor and lots of young people. Very popular. Be sure to check it out.

If you'd like to dance the tango, or see it danced, (the bar in El Pueblo is a bit too small) find Sabor y Sueños Restaurant in Barrio Escalante. Located 25 meters/82 feet west of the Rotanda del Farolito (a traffic circle with a street lamp) and two blocks northeast of St. Teresita. They also feature professional dance shows.

Some of the best and most popular places for young foreigner visitors are in San Pedro, Montes de Oca. They include the large La Calle de la Amargura, packed evenings and weekends with 20-35 year olds, Terra U, located near the Universidad de Costa Rica. Terra features great nachos and an elaborate security system. Also bar La Villa, a rock bar on Calle de la Amargura in San Pedro that boasts a Peruvian food menu.

Salsa 54 *(Calle 3, Av 1 & 3)*. Since we can't salsa very well and Ticos can, we like to watch them whirl on the raised stage at Salsa 54. If you're in town for a while and want to improve your steps, ask about lessons in Latin dance here. One adjoining hall offers slow, close-dancing romantic *bolero* music, while another hall blasts techno rock. Some of the best dancers head here or to El Tobogan *(200 meters/650 feet north, 100/300 east of the La República offices; take a cab)* which offers a huge dance floor that fills with gyrating bodies moving to the beat of live Latin music. In case you stay all

night, they offer a family swimming pool from 9-5 on Saturday and Sunday. Near El Pueblo in Barrio Tournón.

The Shakespeare Bar won't make you smarter. But it's smart to have a drink or eat at this quiet but popular place under the Laurence Olivier Theater. *(It's next to the Sala Garbo complex, Av 2 at Calle 28.)* Perfect for a before- or after-play hangout. Jazz is the music of choice.

El Tunel del Tiempo *(Av Central, Calle 11 & 13)*. We hear the "Tunnel of Time" is the spot to go after hours – 2 am until 10 am the next morning. Well past our bedtime.

Jazz is the music of choice. Live Irish music can be found at Tica Irlanda Bar on Av. 1, where owner Adrian McAteer serves Guinness, imported from Jamaica.

◆ All-Night Eateries

You may choose to people-watch, drink and eat at some famous all-night eateries. Two places vie for top position on the list of all-nighters. Café 1910 is a very good outdoor/veranda restaurant in front of the Gran Hotel. Everyone passes by here sooner or later. Chelles *(Av Central walkway at Calle 9)* was a favored spot of local Ticos. Sadly, it was burnt to the ground. Let us know if it has been rebuilt by the time you visit.

Other 24-hour eating-places include Manolo's *(Av Central)*, Pollo Frito Pío Pío *(Av 2, Calle 2)*, Restaurant don Amado *(Av 2, Calle 6)* and the open-all-weekend Soda Tapia, on the southeast side of Sabana Park. Lastly, if you are desperate for late-night bland American food, there's a new Denny's at the Best Western Irazú.

◆ Gay & Lesbian Nights

La Avispa *(Av 1, between 7 & 8, www.laavispa.co.cr)* is lesbian-owned bar that features three dance floors, big screen TV and pool tables. It's a "rolled-up-shirt-sleeves" kind of place with good music. La Avispa also draws gay men, especially Tuesday nights, and local lesbian women to dance. Closed Mondays. A lively place for people of all sexual persuasions to go clubbing is Deja Vu *(☎ 506/2223/3759, Calle 2, Av 14 & 16)*. Deja Vu is a magnet for gay men and straight party people – especially on the weekends when a well-dressed crowd fills the two dance floors. Café and souvenir shop. Drag shows. One neighborhood gay-friendly, restaurant/bar is

Kasbah *(Calle Central, Av 7 & 9)*, which features a faux Moorish décor and an Internet café.

Places to Stay

These are the best and most interesting of the downtown San José and neighborhood accommodations. The common denominator is that they are near the center of town, have charm and inviting attributes, and they are secure, clean and respectable. If you need more amenities, check out the luxury accommodations listed in the suburbs section.

We made every effort to be as thorough and as accurate as possible. However, things change in Costa Rica – sometimes muy rapido – and prices change faster than anything. To help you stick to your budget and find a place that meets your needs, we indicate relative price levels of various accommodations using dollar symbols. Use it as a guideline and always check rates.

HOTEL PRICE CHART	
Prices are per-night for two people, not including 16% tax	
$	$21-$40
$$	$41-$80
$$$	$81-$125
$$$$	$126-$200
$$$$$	over $200

◆ Moderate Accommodations

Hotel Santo Tomás *(Av 7 between Calles 3 & 5, in US ☎ 877-446-0658, in CR 506/2255-0448, fax 2222-3950, www.hotelsantotomas.com, 20 non-smoking rooms, safety deposit boxes, pool & jacuzzi, restaurant, telephone, cable TV, tropical breakfast included, $$-$$$).* Right on the sidewalk of Av 7 in Barrio Amón is one of San José's most pleasing little B&B inns.

Hotel Santo Tomás

Owner Thomas Douglas, a North American, saved this beautiful home from demolition by converting it into a hotel. Built in 1910 by a former coffee baron, it features antique reproduction furniture, hand-painted tile, highly polished wood floors, Persian rugs and 14-foot-high ceilings. Most rooms rent on the first floor, well back from any traffic noise. There's a small, solar-heated pool with a waterslide, a hard-to-find amenity in the downtown area, and its restaurant, El Oasis, is one of the city's best dining choices. Free Internet access and local telephone calls are included in the rate.

Hotel Grano de Oro

Hotel Grano de Oro *(Calle 30 between Av 2 & 4, ☎ 506/2255-3322, fax 2221-2782, www.hotelgranodeoro.com, 35 rooms, jacuzzis, restaurant, telephone, cable TV, gift shop, mini-bar, room safe, non-smoking, $$$-$$$$).* San José's best downtown hotel The Grano de Oro, grain of gold, is an excellent choice if you desire luxury accommodations without ostentation. Set in a quiet residential section, the Grano is one of the grand old mansions that dot San José's better neighborhoods. The public areas, lighted by skylights, are decorated with plants and fountains, original artwork and carpeting. The large rooms are universally well appointed and comfortable, decorated in blues and whites and warmed with oriental rugs and natural woods. Spotlessly clean. All rooms are non-smoking. Rooftop jacuzzis and sun deck. It's worth eating here at least once, even if you don't stay. Reservations suggested. Say hello to Marco, the manager, for us.

Hotel Fleur de Lys *(Calle 13, between Av 2 & 6, ☎ 506/2223-1206, fax 2221-6310, www.hotelfleurdelys.com, 30 rooms plus master suite, telephone, cable TV, parking, mini-bar, restaurant, bar, breakfast included, $$-$$$).* The amiable Fleur

de Lys is a high-quality conversion of a beautiful Victorian mansion into a pleasing hotel. All bedrooms are named after native Costa Rican flowers and the 12 rooms in a new addition are jr. suites with jacuzzis. The original rooms in the old house are artfully restored with rich wooden ceilings, original paintings and sculpture and comfortable beds with floral duvets. Public areas in this pink and purple hotel sport the original architectural details, including magnificent tile floors. The intimate restaurant overlooks a green patio and features French food; the cozy bar includes a terrace.

Hotel Don Carlos

Hotel Don Carlos *(Calle 9 & Av 9, in US ☎ 866/675-9259, in CR 506/2221-6707, fax 2258-1152, www.doncarloshotel.com, 36 rooms, cable TV, WiFi, restaurant, gift shop, room safe, parking nearby, continental breakfast included, $$-$$$).* The Don Carlos is celebrated as an attractive, clean and comfortable colonial hotel that takes up an entire corner block in a residential area of downtown. The hotel's bedrooms are in two buildings divided by a patio breakfast area with two bubbling fountains. The "colonial" section has the older rooms with typical high ceilings. The newer rooms on two upper stories feature parquet wood floors and floral bedspreads with complimentary curtains. In a previous life, the Don Carlos hotel was the mansion of a Costa Rican president. The attic suite, with two queen beds, is a good value at around US $90 because it has a large amount of space and lots of privacy. No charge for children 12 or younger sharing a room. Well-stocked, well-known, and very large gift shop.

Hotel Presidente *(Av Central walkway & 7, ☎ 506/2222-3022, fax 2221-1205, www.hotel-presidente.com, 110 rooms and suites, cable, telephone, restaurant/café, parking, $$$).* The

Bedroom at Hotel Presidente

Presidente is a pleasant downtown hotel right on the pedestrian walkway at the heart of San José. We stayed here twice and really enjoyed its convenience and comfort. The public areas were remodeled late in 2001, when the restaurant and coffee shop became the News Café,a super popular eatery. It's owned by the same people who run the Tabacón Resort at Arenal, and each property will gladly make reservations at the other.

Hotel le Bergerac *(Calle 35 & Av 8, Los Yoses, ☎ 506/2234-7850, www.bergerac.co.cr, 26 rooms, cable, restaurant, breakfast included, $$-$$$*). On a quiet street in barrio Los Yoses, sits this intimate, French-flavored hotel that attracts business, tourist and even diplomatic clientele. Separate old homes have been beautifully remodeled and connected together with verdant gardens to form the core of one of the more distinctive Costa Rican hotels we've had the pleasure to stay in. Superior rooms, with period furniture and hardwood floors, offer private garden terraces or pocket patios, a welcome addition to already comfortable accommodations. We eschewed the cable TV for hours spent reading, writing and drinking wine on our private patio. The continental restaurant, with an outstanding gourmet menu and French and Chilean wines, is closed Mondays. *C'este magnifique!*

Hotel le Bergerac

Hotel Milvia (100 meters/300 feet north and 100 meters/300 feet east from Centro Comercail Muñoz y Nanne, San Pedro, ☎ 506/2225-4543, fax 2225-7801, www.novanet.co.cr/milvia, 9 rooms, cable TV, e-mail, breakfast included, $$-$$$). The Milvia is set on the corner of a quiet side road a short walk from the two universities in San Pedro. This intimate, sophisticated inn occupies a turn-of-the-century restored Caribbean villa. Each of the large rooms is nonsmoking, tastefully furnished and infectiously bright and cheerful.

Lunch and dinner are available in their polished dining room, and cheap eateries abound near the college. Coffee and tea is available all day long – *gracias*. Children stay free when sharing a room with their parents.

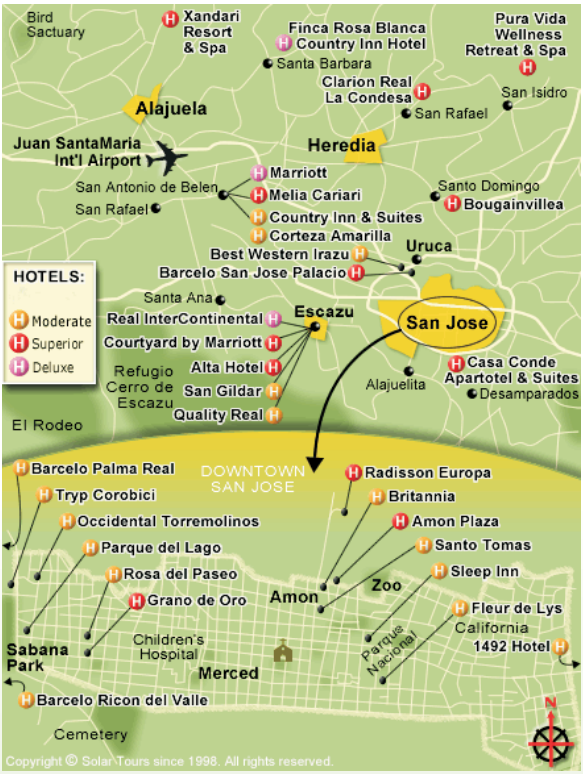
Hotel Milvia

Raya Vida Villa *(Calle 15, Av 11 & 13, ☎ 506/2223-4168, fax 2223-4157, www.rayavida.com, $$$)* is a luxury B&B run by North Americans in a quiet area of large residential homes north of the Casa Amarillo, in Barrio Otoya, near the Bolivar Zoo Park. It's an old, small colonial-style villa that has been restored and decorated with artwork from around the world. One of the four guest rooms features masks from African and Latin American cultures hanging on the walls. Raya Vida is very special, but very hard to find in what feels like a maze of side streets. Best to get a cab.

Hotel 1492 *(Av 1, Calle 31 & 33, ☎ 506/2256-5913, fax 2280-6206, www.hotel1492.com, 10 rooms, breakfast, telephone, cable, safe, $$-$$$)*. The 1492 is an inviting, lavishly decorated Spanish-style mansion converted into a charming little hotel on a one-way street in Barrio Escalante. It has been in the same Costa Rican hotelier family since 1941 and they treat each guest like visiting royalty.

Hotel 1492

High ceilings, original Portuguese tile floors, polished hardwoods, tropical gardens and lovely large rooms make this a fine place to stay in the eastern section of San José. Several appealing eateries grace this trendy neighborhood and the local movie theater is down the block. Formerly known as the Jade y Oro, you'll find it almost in back of the Toruma Youth Hostel. Say hello to the *dueña*, Sabrina, for us.



Hotels in the San José area

◆ Budget Accommodations

Hemingway Inn *(Av 9 & Calle 9, ☎ 506/2221-1804, www.hemingwayinn.com, 17 rooms, cable TV, telephone, room safe, jacuzzi, tropical breakfast included, $$).* This old colonial mansion looks more formal than it is, with moderately priced accommodations in the heart of the historic district. The only pretension that Hemingway Inn expresses is that each room is named for famous authors, including the friendly corner room graced with Ernie's moniker (#4); number 16 (Pamplona) may be the larger. Pleasant public

areas. The rooms are appealing, but basic. Owner Eric Robinson, an environmentalist from Canada, offers tour services. A refreshing jacuzzi is set in the garden.

Hotel La Amistad *(Av 11 & Calle 15, ☎ 506/2258-0021, fax 2258-4900, www.hotelamistad.com, 40 rooms including 17 deluxe rooms, cable TV, in room safe, telephone, breakfast included, $$)*. The Amistad is simple and clean and has recently added a new wing. It features natural wood walls in the bedrooms and is a popular corner hotel in the quiet Barrio Otoya section of San José. Triply attractive for cheery accommodations, low price and friendly staff – plus, it draws interesting clientele from around the world. Amistad means "friendship" in Spanish. They'll store your luggage. Dependable, pleasing place to stay.

Hotel la Amistad

Cinco Hormigas Rojas *(Calle 15 between Av 9 & 11, ☎ /fax 506/2255-3412, 6 rooms, shared & private baths, full breakfast included, $$)*. Cinco Hormigas Rojas translates from the Spanish as "Five Red Ants," reflecting owner Mayra Güell's love of nature. Her small, funky B&B is tucked behind a thriving, overgrown jungle garden front yard. Mayra is an artist and her accommodations definitely show it – wait till you see the bathrooms! Her sense of style combines a Haight Ashbury artistic attitude with a Tica naturalist's love of all creatures great and small. Each basic room has a different color scheme, with bright curtains, plants and a very eclectic décor. Definitely not for everyone.

Lobby of Cinco Hormigas Rojas

Hotel Rincon de San José

Hotel Rincon de San José *(Av 9 & Calle 15, ☎ 506/2221-9702, fax 2222-1241, www.hotel-rincondesanjose.com, 29 rooms, bar, cable TV in most rooms, telephone, continental breakfast included, $$)*. The quaint Rincon hotel resembles an Alpine chalet. It's bright white outside and cheerful inside, with custom-designed furniture. It sits on a somewhat busy corner in the Otoya Barrio. The hotel features a big open patio bar with lots of greenery under the skylight and comfortable accommodations woven together in winding hallways. Light sleepers should avoid rooms that face the street, even though the corner room, #14, is particularly interesting. We fancied the garden-like setting of #8. Formerly the Eidelweiss.

Dunn Inn

Dunn Inn *(Av 11 at Calle 5, in US ☎ 888/360-9521, in CR 506/2256-1134, fax 2221-4596, www.hotel-dunninn.com, 23 rooms plus one suite, mini-bar, cable TV, restaurant/bar, telephone, barber shop, $$)*. The Dunn Inn has kind of a relaxed California atmosphere, especially in the cheery skylight-covered bar and restaurant. Lots of hanging plants, terra cotta tile, exposed brick, and an American clientele add to that impression. Good-size rooms in the original 100-year-old mansion have warm natural wood walls. There are also newer rooms, some slightly smaller, in an addition under a bright hallway. Modern bathrooms throughout. All bedrooms are named using an indigenous or Spanish word and the meanings are posted on wall plaques. The

hotel's large appealing suite features a jacuzzi. Look for the giant-stained glass window of birds and flowers outside; it is part of a private apartment. There is an English-speaking barbershop attached, where owner Roy has worked over 50 years.

◆ Other Choices

Toruma Youth Hostel

Toruma Youth Hostel *(Av Central East, across from KFC, ☎ 506/2224-4085, www.hostel-toruma.com)* has a congenial European quality. It's located in San José, not far from Los Yoses, San Pedro, and the U of C campus. The sprawling old building houses the largest hostel in the country, with 95 beds, segregated by sex. Each tired dormitory room has four to six beds and a large, high-ceiling central lounge that makes a good place to relax and meet with fellow hostellers. If you need a membership card, get one here for US $12 (a passport photo is needed).

Abril Hostal

Abril Hostal *(☎ 506/2256-5913, Calle 25 & Ave 10, Barrio Gonzalez Lahmann, www.abrilhostal.com, $)* offers basic beds in a sparkly clean and appealing 1940s mansion, five blocks from downtown.

The hostel whose name doesn't say it all is Costa Rica Backpackers Hostel (*Ave 6 between Calle 21 & 23, ☎ 506/2221-6191, www.costaricabackpackers.com, pool, Internet*), a surprisingly good budget oasis in town. It has three garden areas, a swimming pool, laundromat and, best of all, free coffee and tea all day. With dorms and rooms, CRBP is a step above the image of a backpacker's hostel. A popular low-budget hotel in down-

Pension de la Cuesta

town San José is the Pension de la Cuesta *(Av 1, Calle 11 & 15, ☎ 506/2256-7946, www.pensiondelacuesta.com, breakfast included, $)*. You can't miss it – it's a pink and purple Caribbean-Victorian mansion, with a sunny communal area that fills with fellow cultural travelers. Faces the National Park.

A low-cost hotel just before Los Yoses and San Pedro is the tiny Ara Macao Inn *(Calle 27 & Av Central, 50 meters/164 feet south of Pizza Hut La California, ☎ 506/2233-2742, www.hotels.co.cr/aramacao, tropical breakfast, $)*. Well worth considering if you're looking for cheap digs. On a quiet side street in a restored, early century home with colonial styling. The congenial hosts here will hold your luggage while you wander the countryside – a big plus.

Hotel Cacts (*Av. 3 bis between Calle 28-30, ☎ 506/2221-2928, www.hotelcacts.com, 25 non-smoking rooms, cable, pool, secure parking, garden, sun deck, $$*) is one of San José's more venerable small hotels with an outstanding reputation for service and quite pleasant digs. It's a long-time personal favorite, too, and has a large and reputable travel agency for tours. Cacts is an excellent value that would be even better if the area around it in Barrio Pitahaya hadn't become somewhat seedy.

Hotel Cacts

Escazú

Escazú has replaced Rohrmoser as the neighborhood of choice for expats living near the capital. If you'd like to stay in Rohrmoser's diplomatic neighborhood, look for the very appealing B&B Hotel Casa

Roland (☎ *506/2231-6571, www.casa-roland.com, jacuzzis, cable, breakfast, bar, $$*), a short distance from Tobias Bolanos Airport. Casa Roland offers 20 rooms tastefully decorated with a collection of works by local artists. Tropical plants fill the lobby and patio areas, inviting you to pull up a stool at the handcrafted bar. An excellent choice if you're taking the morning Nature Air flight to explore other parts of the country.

The best values in gentrified Escazú are the small hotels and luxury bed-and-breakfast rooms that dot the hillside villages. Escazú is actually two towns in one, San Rafael de Escazú and San Antonio de Escazú. As you come into town, the road forks (at an area known as El Cruce). Go right for San Rafael or straight up the hill for San Antonio.

Casa El Dorado *(San Antoñio Escazu, ☎ 506/8-318-7517, breakfast included, $$$).* The Casa is a large, luxurious Spanish-styled villa with gorgeous rooms and breathtaking views of the Central Valley. In-house spa treatments available. A real treat.

Costa Verde Inn *(San Antonio de Escazú, ☎ 506/2228-4080, fax 2289-8591, www.costaverdeinn.com, tennis, pool, jacuzzi, restaurant, fireplace, breakfast included, $$).* The Costa Verde in Escazú is a private mansion that belongs to the owner of the beautiful Costa Verde Hotel in Manuel Antonio. It lives up to its claim as a "country inn with all the amenities of a small resort." An apartment is available and one of the big guest rooms has a unique stone waterfall-like shower. Filling breakfasts are served. Costa Verde is located in a quiet residential area above the city, near the graveyard. Great value.

The hotelier's hotel in Escazú is Hotel San Gildar *(next to CR Country Club, ☎ 506-289-8843, fax 2228-6454, www.hotel sangildar.com, pool, restaurant, breakfast included, $$$)*, a beautiful inn that opens from its entryway to a hacienda-style central courtyard with a big blue pool and three levels of rooms on a garden hillside. It impressed and pleased us.

Hotel San Gilder

◆ B&Bs

Not to be overlooked in Escazú are the plethora of B&Bs, many owned by North Americans. In the San Rafael section there's Casa de las Tias *(☎ 506/2289-5517, fax 2289-7353, www.hotels.co.cr/casatias.html, $$-$$$)*. Xavier Vela and Pilar Saavedra-Vela (great names, aren't they?) welcome guests to their charming country town house, one of Escazú's finest guest quarters. Elegant, airy rooms and big breakfast. The name means "The Aunts' House."

Villa Escazú *(☎ 506/2289-7971, fax 2228-9566, http://www.hotels.co.cr/villaescazu/, $$)* is a comfortable Swiss chalet-style B&B with an additional studio apartment available on the pretty garden level. Gourmet breakfast included. Central Escazú, 900 meters/2,961 feet west of Banco Nacional. Very pleasant with tropical gardens.

On the crest of a hill in a suburb known as Bello Horizonte is Posada El Quijote *(☎ 506/2289-8401, fax 2289-8729, www.quijote.co.cr, $$-$$$)* a sprawling, colonial ranch house that serves as a B&B inn. It has wonderful large open areas with a patio and terrace that overlook the valley. Very homey and warm, yet with plenty of class. Big, bright rooms and walled gardens. Turn left before the light at Trejos Montealegre shopping center, stay left, and look right for the sign to Bello Horizonte Barrio. Hard to find but worth it.

ZARATE, THE WITCH OF ESCAZÚ

Escazú has its share of new age followers among the North Americans living there – perhaps because locals know Escazú as the home of Zarate, an enchanted *bruja* (witch). Zarate lives in Piedra Blanca, the rock formation on Pico Mountain above the town. Known for her acts of kindness, she once healed a poor *campesino* and gave him a sack of grapefruit. Tired of carrying it, he kept one and dumped the rest on the road. He regretted his laziness later. When he took the fruit out of his pocket, it had turned to gold. One year, Zarate fell in love with the provincial governor who spurned her. In anger, she turned him into a peacock. The lovelorn, cigar-smoking *bruja* is said to roam the countryside in the misty hills above Escazú. Listen for her laugh in the mist.

◆ Airport & Beyond

If you don't want to stay in San José proper, or you are priced out of Escazú, there are many very good hotels in suburban or rural com-

munities within easy driving distance of downtown and the airport. Be sure to read about the worthwhile accommodations, including boutique hotels, in Heredia, Alejuela, Atenas and Grecia.

Places to Eat

San José offers a great variety of eating establishments for all tastes. One of the most enjoyable things we do on our vacation is to find new "favorite" places to eat. Our personal criteria are quite flexible – sometimes we look for ambiance, service, the character of the place, or even the characters *in* the place. On other days we search for the best view or value. In every case we look for quality food. Don't forget, several of the hotels above have very fine dining rooms for all three meals; we also mention some good places to nosh in the *Nightlife* section. The following eateries should provide you with a pleasing combination of good food, good vibes and good times. We organized the restaurants by location to the downtown, not by cuisine or price, so read through them all before you decide. Most of the various *barrios* are within easy walking or cab distance. *Buen provecho!*

Except where noted, reservations are not usually necessary unless you have a large party or specific needs.

Although we made every effort to be as thorough, complete and as accurate as possible, things change in Costa Rica – sometimes muy rapido. Prices change faster than anything, so we indicate relative price levels here, using dollar signs.

DINING PRICE CHART	
Prices based on a typical entrée, per person, and do not include a beverage.	
$	under $5
$$	$5 to $10
$$$	$11-$20
$$$$	over $20

◆ Center City

El Balcon de Europa *(Calle 9 near Av Central walkway, ☎ 506/2221-4841, $$, no credit cards).* This is the oldest restaurant in town – and certainly the most ambient. It opened as an Italian eatery in 1909, and has an Old World atmosphere with wood paneling. Glass plate photos of San José hang on the walls, along with framed inspirational quotations such as "Truth is the child of time," portraits of Costa Rican presidents and postcards from *todo el mundo*. Green-and-white linen tablecloths and a wooden plank table stacked with Italian cheeses add flavor to the inviting dining room. We always eat

here and we have never been disappointed (although the chef's rendition of Italian "gravy" is not ours!). The house wine is very pleasing. Closed Saturday because the Costa Rican-Italian owner/chef, Franco Piatti, a former Olympic competitor, is Jewish.

Tin Jo *(Calle 11, Av 6 & 8, ☎ 506/2257-3622, $$-$$$).* In 1972, the Tin Jo Restaurant opened to little fanfare – after all, there is a plethora of Chinese restaurants in San José. But when a reader's poll in *La Nacion* called it the "Best Chinese Restaurant in Costa Rica," everyone came running. The delicious and diverse menu features dishes from China, Japan (including sushi), Thailand, Indonesia, India, Cambodia, the Philippines and Malaysia. The owner, Maria, who has an MBA from UCLA, and her German-born husband, Robert, met while working in refugee camps in Thailand and spent time all over Southeast Asia developing an appreciation for the food. Attentive wait staff, double damask linens and fresh flowers on the tables. Treat yourself.

Manolo's Restaurante *(Av Central between Av Central & 2, ☎ 506/2221-2041, $).* This well-known hangout has a fast-food eatery on the ground floor that spills out onto the pedestrian part of Av Central with tables under a short awning. It's open 24 hours. The seating continues upstairs on two floors. The décor is heavy, with natural wood insets and tile work. The open kitchen with a charcoal grill serves up good Costa Rican dishes. Try their *churro*, a deep-fried pastry filled with a sweet condensed filling that is like a milky butterscotch. It's high in fat and calories, but delicious. If you really want to clog your arteries, try dipping them in chocolate!

Spoons *(Av Central walkway, as half-block east of the Plaza, plus various locations, $).* With a name like Spoons, this place sounds like it should be an ice cream parlor, but it is actually a popular eat-in restaurant chain (also offering takeout). Sit in the dining area and fill out your order on a pre-printed form. If you're not sure what things are, the helpful waiters will happily explain. They serve a varied menu (three meals a day), as well as bakery sweets and excellent coffee – plus ice cream.

Triego Miel *(Calle 3 & Av Central, next to Cine Omni and opposite Lehmann's bookstore, $).* This pleasing large bakery has a tiny eating area, where you can breakfast, lunch or dinner on delicious pastries and sandwiches, both sweet and savory. Good coffee.

Rosti Pollo *(various locations, $-$$).* For sit-down dining, Rosti Pollo is a good choice. They offer much more than their mouth-watering wood-roasted chicken specialty, with a selection of Costa Rican desserts, such as *tres leches*. A friendly ambiance, pretty good food and very good service. The Escazú spot is almost upscale.

Vishnu Restaurant *(various locations: Av 1, Calle 1 & 3; Av 6, Calle 7 & 9; Calle 1, Av 4: and Calle 14, Av Central & 2, $-$$)* is an

appealing vegetarian restaurant chain that sometimes lines table dividers with exotic fruit and fresh vegetables. Opens early and closes late. Draws a crowd at lunch and dinner. Another veggie hotspot is Shakti (☎ *506/2222-4475*) on Av. 8 and Calle 13. It offers good vegetarian lunches and great juice drinks in attractive surroundings.

Restaurant del Mar (*Parque Morazán, $$*). Look for the Del Mar behind incredible stained glass bow windows in the former Gurdián Mansion, behind the iron gates facing the park. Handsome hardwood floors and an impressive genteel décor make up for its lackluster cuisine. Worth a meal just for the setting, the ambitious Del Mar is owned by the Del Rey Hotel, *sans les dames de la nuit*.

For good cheap eats there's a food court in Plazavenida, a minimall on Walkway. Lots of coffee and sandwich places with typical tico food, the most popular of which is a buffet at La Hacienda. Also sushi, burgers, and rib joints.

◆ Barrios Amon & Otoya

El Oasis *(Av 7 between Calles 3 & 5, ☎ 506/2255-0448, fax 2222-3950, www.hotelsantotomas.com, $$-$$$)*. This restaurant is, as its name implies, a welcome oasis of fine dining in a desert of continental cuisine opportunities downtown. With big windows with iron grills and walls that push right to the sidewalk on Av. 7, El Oasis is the pride of the Hotel Santo Tomas. The back of the restaurant faces the hotel's pocket pool and garden. The food here is particularly tasty and the presentation attractive. The dining room features quality china and linens and soft music. There is a bar for cocktails, open for dinner only. Decadent desserts.

El Oasis

La Cocina de Leña *(El Pueblo Shopping Center, ☎ 506/2255-1360, $$)*. The "Firewood Kitchen" offers traditional Costa Rican country food in a rustic dining room with soft lighting. It's located near the center gazebo in the middle of El Pueblo's complex of hip bars and artsy shops (see page 126). Tico rico.

JR's House of Ribs (*next to the zoo entrance, ☎ 506/2223-0523,$$)*. Open seven days a week. Owner Ron Nickelson Rose, a WWII vet, barbeques up country-style ribs with a Cajun influence. The rest of the menu is definitely Tex-Mex and definitely delicious.

Café Mundo *(Av 9, Calle 15, Barrio Otoya, ☎ 506/2222-6190, $$$)* could be called "Tico yuppie" for its international nouveau cuisine, but it resists becoming too upscale and manages to maintain a bohemian ambiance and clientele. It's at once a hangout, gourmet restaurant and lively bar. Housed in a colonial mansion, Café Mundo meets all our criteria for a special night out, or just a quick bite and a drink. Put on your mock turtleneck and mingle with San José's eclectic elite.

Amon Plaza Café (*Av. 11 & Calle 3, $$)*. Under a large overhang up from the street, on a corner, is the new café restaurant of the Hotel Amon Plaza. It offers terrace dining and an interesting and generous all-you-can-eat buffet dining for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Pleasant, relaxed eating.

◆ West End

Grano de Oro (*Calle 30, between Av. 2 & 4, ☎ 506/2255-3322, $$$)*. Rich food in a lush garden patio setting is an inadequate start in describing this renowned restaurant in the Hotel Grano de Oro. And it's renowned for good reasons – with a gourmet international menu, excellent wines and a soothing romantic ambiance, the "Grain of Gold" is the perfect place for nocturnal gastronomic delights. We eat here every time we're in town and recommend it very highly; reservations suggested.

Restaurant at Grano de Oro

Lubnan Lebanese Restaurant *(Paseo Colon, between Calle 22 & 24, across from the Mercedes dealership, ☎ 506/2257-6071, $$)*. For vegetarians and lovers of Middle Eastern food, the Lubnan is the place to go for Lebanese cuisine. Their appealing décor in a storefront restaurant makes clever use of low-cost burlap and cork – à la 1960s. They offer very generous servings of delicious Middle Eastern food. Try the platter of hummus (chick peas), baba ghanouj

(eggplant with garlic), labne (strained yogurt), and a huge falafel with lettuce and tomato wrapped in a thick pita.

Mil Sabores (*Paseo Colon, near the overhead walkway, $-$$)*. The pagoda-styled "Thousand Flavors" may not offer quite that many – but it is a large and very popular Chinese restaurant with a brisk take-out business and daily specials. We are particularly fond of the chicken-vegetable soup with a side order of white or fried rice. Ahh-so good.

◆ East End

Aya Sofya *(Av Central & Calle 21, ☎ 506/2221-7185, ayasofiacr@yahoo.com, $)*. Though the Turkish community numbers in San José can be counted on two hands, Mehmet Onuralp opened a traditional Turkish café. It's popular with people who enjoy ethnic foods. Aya Sofya is set in a one-story colonial building on a corner. Its interior is bright and modern, with large windows on two sides and handwoven Turkish rugs on the walls. The café has a large menu in Spanish and Turkish. Not fluent in either? Ask for the Turkish/English menu. Lunch and dinner specials. Doner kebap is a gyro, pide is thick homemade pita bread. There is homemade yogurt, and a glass of strong tea after your meal is on the house. Or have a sweet cup of Turkish coffee made in their samovar. Don't stir it, let the coffee grinds settle. Non-smoking. Open 11 am- 10:30 pm.

Olio Pub (*Av. 5 & Calle 35, Barrio Escalante, ☎ 506/2281-0541, $$)*. Olio's is a hip tapas bar/restaurant, just like they have in Spain, with an intimate atmosphere and cubby-hole seating. A trendy crowd of students and young professionals flock here for the food, conversation and *vino*. Across the railroad tracks from Olio's is a lower-priced alternative, the Bolero Bar, serving typical Tico grub with beer and drinks, either inside or on a street-level terrace.

Parrillada El Churrasco Steak House (*Calle 31, Av 9 & 11, ☎ 506/2225-0778, $$$)*. We decided to eat here the first time on a whim, hoping for a good restaurant to celebrate the publication of a new edition of our *Adventure Guide to the Yucatán* on our last night in Costa Rica. What a great choice El Churrasco turned out to be! Like every Argentine *parrillada* it's a meat-lovers delight; but with excellent Chilean wines and an inviting hacienda décor, it offers a thoroughly enchanting evening meal. Open for dinner at 8 pm.

◆ Escazú

You'll never go hungry in Escazú, where there seems to be a good restaurant on every corner. We'll skip the more predictable chain offerings such as Tony Roma's so you can explore the many *sabors* offered by smaller, local establishments. If it's a fancy dinner you're craving, look up the mountain above the *barrio* of Paco to Le Monastère *(☎ 506/2289-4404, www.monastere-restaurant.com, $$$)*, which offers romantic French-inspired dinners in a multi-level former monastery featuring a panoramic vista of the towns below. They're open from 6 pm for dinner (closed Sundays) and offer a bar downstairs called La Cava. They've received mixed culinary reviews, but nothing beats the fabulous view of the valley.

Le Monastère

Another eye-popping view – at a lower cost – is from rustic Tiquicia *(☎ 506/2289-5839, $$)*, perched on the edge of the mountain overlooking the valley. We enjoyed a long evening here, eating typical Tico fare and watching a thousand points of light twinkle below. Take a taxi or follow the many signs on the road up through San Antonio. Call before you head out to make sure they are open.

Back down at El Cruce, where the road forks, almost hidden in the little strip mall behind a building, is a delicious Italian restaurant on two floors called Sale e Pepe *(☎ 506/2289-5750)*. The pizza and pasta are excellent and the place gets packed with hungry noshers who come for the reasonable prices, fresh Italian dishes plus good selection of wines. Popular for lunch and dinner.

Across the street is another quintessential Escazú eatery, Quiubo *(☎ 506/2228-4091, $$)*. They serve good Tico food and generous drinks in a faux-rustic dining area. Late-night diners can wander over to the attached nightclub, Requete, or mellow out in the piano bar, Q'tal. In fact, there's seemingly no end to nightlife, finger-food kinds of bar/restaurants that cater to local ex-pat crowd and hip visitors. And for exotic ice-cream aficionados (or just lovers, like us), look for Mondo Gelato, located in Multicentro Paco, San Rafael de

Escazú. They serve mouth-watering unconventional and traditional flavors.

Brit culture (Manchester style) mixes with the revolution at El Ché Pub, 300 m south of La Cruce in San Rafael. Have a drink and lament that Man United gets so much more coverage than City, even though Paulo Wanchope played there! Don't look at us, we root for the Argyle (if you know who they are, send us an email).

View of the Central Valley *(Bruce & June Conord)*

The Central Valley

What makes the Central Valley surrounding San José so fascinating is the many smaller communities where you can absorb a real slice of Costa Rican life. If you have the time and self-discipline to relax and wander on a vacation (rather than jam everything in at once), towns like Cartago, Heredia, Zarcero and Orosí are like treasure chests to open. You'll find gems of shops, bars, restaurants, art galleries, flower and vegetable markets, little churches and community affairs. The next time you come to Costa Rica you may find you want to stay in one of these instead of San José. We look at locales southeast of San José first, then northwest.

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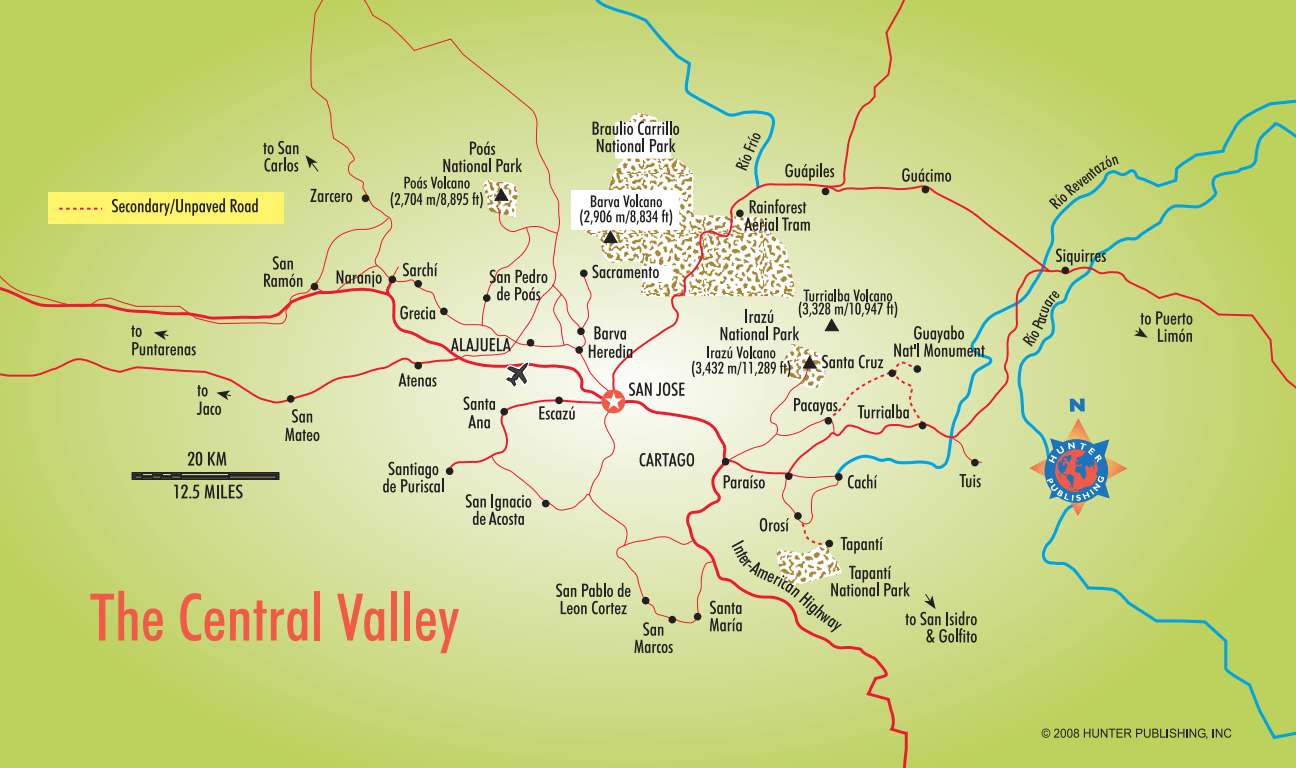
  (Grecia, Atenas, Sarchí, Naranjo, Zercero, San Ramón, San Carlos)

East of Town

◆ Cartago

Cartago lies about a half-hour by bus (less by car) and 23 km/14 miles east of San José via the Inter-American Highway. It was the original capital of Costa Rica for 300 years until it lost a power struggle to San José. A major obstacle to its capital ambitions was the Irazú Volcano, prone to sporadic *temblores*, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions. When President Kennedy visited Costa Rica eight months before his assassination in 1963, Irazú welcomed his Alliance for Peace efforts with an eruption that blanketed Cartago and San José with thick volcanic ash. Because of that, Kennedy left earlier than planned – or perhaps it was the lack of a good hotel in town. In the center of town, the ruins of the roofless St. Bartholomew Temple (most commonly known as Las Ruinas) dominate the cen-

Following page: Central Valley (Bruce & June Conord)


Secondary/Unpaved Road
to San Carlos
Zarcero
Poás National Park
Poás Volcano (2,704 m/8,895 ft)
Braulio Carrillo National Park
Barva Volcano (2,906 m/8,834 ft)
Río Frío
Guápiles
Guácimo
Río Reventazón
Rainforest Aerial Tram
Siquirres
San Ramón
Naranjo
Sarchí
San Pedro de Poás
Sacramento
Turrialba Volcano (3,328 m/10,947 ft)
Río Pacuare
to Puerto Limón
Grecia
Irazú National Park
Guayabo Nat'l Monument
to Puntarenas
ALAJUELA
Barva
Heredia
Irazú Volcano (3,432 m/11,289 ft)
Santa Cruz
Atenas
SAN JOSE
to Jaco
Santa Ana
Escazú
Pacayas
Turrialba
San Mateo
N
20 KM
12.5 MILES
CARTAGO
Santiago de Puriscal
Paraíso
Cachí
Tuis
San Ignacio de Acosta
Orosí
Tapantí
Inter-American Highway
Tapantí National Park
San Pablo de Leon Cortez
Santa María
to San Isidro & Golfito
San Marcos
The Central Valley
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SAN JOSE
TOLL
Tres Ríos
Cartago
Irazú Volcano (3432 m/9414 ft)
Coliblanco
Potrero Cerrado
Terra Blanca
Cot
Pacayas
Juan Viñas
Turrialba
Guayabo National Monument
to Siquirres & Limón
Río Reventazón
Paraíso
Lankester Gardens
Ujarras
Cachí
Lake Cachí
Río Aguacaliente
Orosi
to San Isidro de General
to Tapantí (9.6 km/6 miles)
10 KM
6 MILES
N
HUNTER PUBLISHING
Cartago & Turrialba Environs
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tral square, with its peaceful garden of bougainvillea and sweet pine trees. First dedicated in 1575, the church was destroyed in that same year by an earthquake. It was rebuilt but a second severe earthquake destroyed it in 1910; legend claims it was divine punishment for the actions of an amorous priest. People from Cartago took that as an omen and left the church as a ruin.

Cartago's other famous church is La Basílica de Nuestra Señora de Los Angeles, where, on August 2 each year, thousands of Costa Ricans from all over the country make a pilgrimage to honor the black-skinned Virgin Mary, La Negrita. The town all but shuts down as pilgrims head to the *basilica*. Many walk on their knees as they near the church, a sign of humility.

Basílica de Nuestra Señora de Los Angeles

THE STORY OF

LA NEGRITA

A peasant girl, Juana Pereira, discovered the statue of La Negrita, a black-skinned image of the Virgin, on August 2, 1635, on what was then the outskirts of Cartago. After a couple of miracles were attributed to the statue, Church authorities authorized a *basilica* to be built on the site of its discovery. The unusual Byzantine style of the Basílica dates from 1926 after the original church was badly damaged in the 1920 earthquake.

Follow the steps behind the altar down to the Cripta de Piedra to see the rock where Juana first found the statue. The adjoining room contains hundreds of miniature silver trinkets (mostly legs and arms) and all kinds of charms left by faithful parishioners. They signify alleged or wished-for healing miracles performed by the Virgin. Water bottled from a spring at the site, purported to work miracles, is for sale in surrounding shops. La Señora de Los Angeles is the Patron Saint of Costa Rica.

Leaving Cartago

If you've taken a public bus to Cartago, you can ask for the bus stop that will take you to Orosí and Lankester Gardens, or opt to take a taxi in a different direction up to Irazú Volcano. If you're planning your visit a day in advance, be sure to get to Irazú early as clouds roll in by late morning (park opens at 8 am).

◆ Irazú Volcano

The drive up from Cartago to Costa Rica's highest volcano is magnificent. Volcanic eruptions over the millennium have blessed the slopes with fertile soil and farmers try to use every inch of land. The route is quite long, 32 km/20 miles of winding road above the valley, to a high altitude, 4,332 meters/11,260 feet above sea level. Bring warm clothes to layer as you get higher, it can get very cold at the summit. Each switchback offers a photo opportunity and there are numerous pull-overs. As you get closer to the summit, the temperature drops and the crops change from semi-tropical to temperate to cool/cold-weather produce.

Near the park entrance (US $8, open 8 am-3:30 pm) you'll find restrooms in a small coffee and gift shop next to the parking lot. The landscape up here is lunar; nothing but lichens and the odd plant grow in the gray cinder soil. Follow the path to the long wooden fence that separates you from the deep active crater. In its center is a round lake of bright pea-green water with a couple of *fumarolas* that emit hot sulfur gas and steam.

Buses to the volcano direct from San José leave at 8 am weekends and holidays from Av 2 across from the Gran Hotel. They return at 12:30. Call Buses Metrópli *(☎ 506/2272-0651)*. The US $5 price beats the cost of going with a travel agent tour.

A few restaurants are noteworthy on the mountain's slopes. The first, Restaurant 1910 (open daily from noon to 10 pm), offers

buffet dining with a generous selection of Tico and international dishes. The walls have old photos from the 1910 earthquake that destroyed so many of Cartago's old colonial buildings. Good eats.

Hotel Montaña *(☎ 506/2253-0827)* is a family restaurant and old hotel with a great deal of character on the bend half way up the mountain. The grounds that surround its metal-clad exterior are manicured and the atmosphere inside the restaurant is like stepping back in time. The Victorian-era rooms upstairs provide adequate accommodations – basic but clean – with lots and lots of wood. This is a grand place that has retained its rustic grandeur, but progress and people have passed it by.

Closer to the summit is the funky overhanging restaurant/bar, Linda Vista. It's larger than it looks from the outside and its entry foyer, bar, walls and trim are covered with business cards, expired licenses, photo IDs and postcards from the thousands of visitors. Stop in for a typical Tico lunch or drink and enjoy the view. Try to find one of our old Press Cards hanging around.

◆ Lankester Gardens

In 1917, 40-year-old British botanist Charles Lankester laid out 10 hectares/24.7 acres of gardens six km/four miles east of Cartago on the road to Paraíso that is now known as Lankester Gardens *(☎ 506/2552-3247)*. Surrounded by tall pines, Lankester worked to catalog and develop new species of orchids, a delicate bloom treasured by flower aficionados.

Costa Rica is world renowned for its beautiful orchids. Exotic blooming orchids are the largest family of flowering plants in the world and they thrive in warm, humid climates. The many varieties have different styles of flowers, from tiny delicate petals running along the stem to bold blossoms and big thick green

Lankester Gardens orchids (Sairen42)

leaves. Costa Rica claims up to 1,500 different varieties, 75% of which are epiphytes.

EPI-WHATS?

Epiphytes (from the Greek for "upon plants") attach to host trees and gain their nourishment from airborne dust and rain. These are not parasitic relationships because they do not feed on their hosts. In the amazing world of nature, many tree orchids make use of variety-specific pollinators – bees, ants, hummingbirds, wasps and moths – for their fertilization.

By the time Lankester died in 1969, at the age of 90, he had cataloged 80 native species previously unknown in Costa Rica, and developed another 110 hybrid species. Upon his death the gardens were taken over by the University of Costa Rica. Marked paths point out the over 800 different species on display as well as other flowering native plants. The gardens have orchids in bloom all year, but blooms are most prolific between February and May. Open 8:30 am-3:30 pm; US $6.

If you're on a public bus from Cartago toward Orosí (marked with Lankester as a stop) ask the bus driver to let you off at the gardens. It's a short walk up dirt road past a go-kart racetrack to the gardens

◆ Orosí

Once you zigzag through the town of Paraíso, you'll be only a short distance from the green, dramatically beautiful Orosí Valley. The best way to appreciate it is to stop at the Mirador de Orosí public park, just outside of town. Climb the steps or wander the path to the hilltop knob that offers a breathtaking vista of Orosí. Its steep valley walls are dark green with coffee bushes and shade trees and the Río Orosí, which feeds the larger Río Reventazón, meanders along its flat floor. Once you turn the corner after the Mirador, it's all downhill – steeply downhill – from there.

The Orosi Valley (Dirk van der Made)

peaceful little village of Orosí, founded in 1561 by Franciscan monks, boasts several minor attractions, a couple of spring-fed swim clubs, *balnearios*, as well as an important colonial church.

The Iglesia de San José de Orosí sits on the far side of the soccer field in the middle of town, at the bottom of a steep coffee-covered hillside. It is Costa Rica's oldest church in continuous use, built in 1735 to replace one that had fallen into ruin when villagers abandoned the town for 36 years after a plague decimated the population. It is styled like an adobe church you might find in Taos, New Mexico. The

Iglesia de San José de Orosí

original large wooden roof, terra cotta floor and heavy wood pews have survived. The interior period paintings are by Mexican artist Miguel Cabrera.

Next door in the former Franciscan cloister is the Religious Art Museum, which was founded in 1980. It contains religious artifacts, paintings and a restored monk's cell. It's open 9-5 pm, closed Mondays, US $1.

Just south of town is Balneario Los Patios (☎ *506/2533-3009)*, one of two major swim clubs in town, fed by slightly warmed (10°C/50°F) springs heated by the Turrialba Volcano. Our favorite is Balneario Termal, up a side street next to the B&B Orosí Lodge (look for signs on the right). Each club offers a restaurant and several swimming pools, changing rooms, showers, basketball courts and picnic areas. We often made it here as a day-trip or an impromptu overnight from San José during weekdays. On weekends and school holidays the swim clubs get very crowded.

Sanchiri Lodge

On your way in, just before the Mirador, you pass the pine tree-wooded driveway to Sanchiri Lodge *(a short distance south of the Orosí Mirador Park, ☎ 506/2574-3870, www.sanchiri.com)*, a very appealing cabina hotel with an inexpensive restaurant overlooking the town and the valley. In fact, if you look back from town you'll see the name painted on their roof atop the hillside. The lodge has been in the same family for five generations. Their dining room serves good typical Costa Rican food at very reasonable prices. Plus, there's a wonderful view. Individual cabins come with hot water and balconies – very good for a stay. Take local tours with Aventuras Turísticas Orosí *(☎ 506/2573-3030)*.

Good accommodations in town start with the Orosí Lodge *(next to the* balneario*, ☎ 506/2533-3578, owww.orosilodge.com)*, a charming B&B that features new rooms with verandas and a pleasing café and snack bar. It's sandwiched between a plant nursery and the pool, and backs up to the mountainside. This wonderful little gem,

originally built as a vacation home by a Canadian couple from Québec, is super clean and friendly. On the same street is 1/2 Libra *(☎ 506/2533-3838, $$)*, a new hotel, bar and restaurant with motel-like rooms. Breakfast is included in the room rate.

Orosi Lodge

If you're on a slim budget, another choice could be Montaña Linda *(☎ 506/2533-3640, www.montanalinda.com)*, a rudimentary backpackers' youth hostel that also offers conversational language courses (the cheapest we've found). They'll arrange a homestay with a Tico family for increased immersion, the key to learning more quickly. Another low-cost place to stay, located on a bend on the road into town, is Las Torrejas *(☎ 506/2533-3534)*, owned by friendly Freddie Mora.

Two km/1.25 miles east of town (there's just one road that goes in and out) is a turn for a partially paved road (not so good in the rainy season) to Tapantí, a 6,000-acre reserve that has recently been joined with the Macizo de la Muerte Park to create the Tapantí-Macizo de la Muerte National Park. There's a cloud forest entrance on the Inter-American Highway, south of Cartago, but you may like the adventuresome "back way," along the river past the Río Macha Electrical Plant. The park has hiking trails and gets a significant amount of precipitation each year, even for Costa Rica, resulting in an impressive biodiversity. A good place to stay while investigating the many trails is Kirí Lodge *(☎ 506/2533-2272, www.kirilodge@hotmail.com)* near the park entrance. Five km/three miles short of Tapantí you'll pass Purisil Park *(☎ 506/2228-6630)*, a trout farm and nature park. Here, you can fish in either of its three lakes or wander along the three hiking trails. Call in advance for an early morning or teatime guided birding tour. The nearby picturesque town of the same name was once the coffee plantation of former President, Rafael Angel Calderón.

Casa del Sonador

Alternatively, as you leave Orosí village over the river, on the way to the lake, follow the main road over the single lane, steel suspension bridge and you'll come to the Restaurante Río in Palomo, a large, well-known restaurant with rustic décor and good fresh fish. If you continue on this road, it is the long way to Lake Cachí. On the way (be patient) is the rustic art studio known as Casa del Sonador, Dreamer's House *(☎ 506/2533-3297)*. There, woodcarving brothers Miguel and Hermes Queseda carry on the art tradition of their father, Macedenio. The family never had enough money to buy toys for their children so the young Macedenio carved his own. Eventually he became Professor of Art at the U of Costa Rica. He began teaching his sons his craft when they were very young and their current work is reminiscent of his well-known *primitivista* style. Using only scrap coffee roots and woods gleaned from the countryside and rivers, they create wonderful images of people in their beloved country – all without the use of stains, varnishes or sealants. Find their rustic art studio on the right, just before a small bridge and stop sign. Only 100 meters/330 feet or so away is the popular La Casona del Cafetal *(☎ 506/2577-1414*), where they offer elegant lakeview dining, with an international and Tico menu, in an relaxing garden setting. Ask about horse rides and tours of their family-run coffee plantation and be sure to check out their cool jungle-painted restrooms.

This trip can be made into a giant loop by going around Lake Cachí and heading back to Cartago through Paraíso and Ujarrás – or clockwise from Ujarrás to Cachí to Orosí and back.

◆ Lake Cachí & Ujarrás

The more common way to Lake Cachí is not through Orosí, but straight through Paraíso for seven km/four miles through Ujarrás, a

simple village with a great little ruined colonial-era church (1.5 km/.9 miles down a side road). Before the village stop at a dramatic lookout, Mirador de Ujarrás, at the top of the valley walls. It offers an impressive view of the valley and lake, with a quiet picnic area.

Church at Ujarrás

The colonial church in Ujarrás, built of limestone between 1575 and 1580, resides where an indigenous Huetar Indian fisherman claimed to have found a box with an image of the Virgin Mary. Unable to move the box, local people built a classic Spanish Colonial church, (Nuestra Señora de la Limpia Concepción) on the site. Over time, the spirit of Mary is said to have performed several miracles for the villagers, including a spontaneous bell ringing that warned them of an impending flood. In 1666 she is credited with helping a hastily organized militia repel an invasion of the Caribbean coast by the English pirate Henry Morgan. But she failed to save Ujarrás from a devastating flood in 1833 that damaged the village so badly the people abandoned it and rebuilt on higher ground. Today, the church is beautifully landscaped and makes a worthwhile visit for people like us who love gardens and old church ruins. Across the road is one of two spring-fed *balnearios* (swimming pools) open to the public.

The big hydroelectric dam of Lake Cachí is three km outside of Ujarrás on the northeastern side of the lake. From here the Río Reventazón ("Bursting River") spills down the mountainside to the Caribbean. Weekenders fish, hike lakeside trails and windsurf here.

Cool off in the highlands above the lake in the delightful Cabañas de Montaña Piedras Albas *(in US ☎ 305/279-2468, in CR ☎ 506/2577-1462, http://cabinas.co.cr, $-$$)*. This airy hotel offers pleasing spacious one-bedroom cabañas perched on the mountainside overlooking the Orosí Valley. At 4,250 feet, the temperature averages 70°F.

◆ Turrialba

The agricultural town of Turrialba, at the foot of the dormant volcano of the same name, was a crossroads town on, what was once the only route from San José to Limón. In 1978, the Guápiles highway replaced it in importance. Before the powerful 1991 earthquake destroyed the Atlantic Railroad, it also served as an important rail junction for shipping produce by train. Down now, but not out, Turrialba (pop. 30,000, 55 km/34 miles from San José) has reinvented itself as the whitewater capital of Costa Rica, thanks in part to the interest of eco-adventure tourism. To get here by car, go to Cartago, then Paraíso and make a left at the park in the center of town. If you're going to and from the Caribbean side, consider taking this scenic route at least once.

DID YOU KNOW: Costa Rica currently has five active volcanoes and seven "sleeping" ones. Over the ions, more than 100 other volcanoes have gone extinct on land and another 100 can be found under the surrounding seas.

Adventures

On the Pacuare with Loco's

Proximity of the Río Reventazón, Río Pacuare and Lake Cachí make Turrialba a good, inexpensive base to kayak, raft and windsurf. See the *Adventures on Water* section in San José (page 117) for more details. If you're staying in town, rafting prices are cheaper, even from the companies in San José. In addition, there are some local operators: Loco's Tropical Tours *(☎ 506/2556-6035, www.whiteh2o.com)*; Costa Rica Rios *(in US ☎ 888-434-0776, in CR 506/2556-9617, www.costaricarios.com);* and Tico River Adventures *(☎ 506/2556-1231, www.ticoriver.com).*

Equally thrilling is canyoning, an active adventure that involves rappelling down a waterfall. Explornatura, a part of Costa Rica Canyoning (☎ *506/2556 4032, www. costaricacanyoning.com*) offers raft trips and rappelling down four waterfalls, zip lining down four canopy cables through the forest, descending a tall tree and walking across a 132-foot hanging bridge – an unforgettable adrenaline rush.

East of town in the small town of Pavones is Parque Viborana *(☎ 506/2538-1510)*, an educational serpentarium and wildlife rehabilitation center. Owner Minor Camacho's specialty is snakes, from which he extracts venom for study and medicinal purposes – quite a sight! Open daily, and well worth the US $6 admission.

Guayabo National Monument *(☎ 506/2559-1220),* 19 km/11.5 miles northeast of Turrialba, is Costa Rica's most auspicious pre-Columbian archeological dig. Pleasant, natural and quiet, the cobbled streets, ruined aqueducts, bridges, and rocky building foundations that have been uncovered from an early indigenous settlement make for a serene and completely un-touristy attraction. A path resembling a Maya *sacbé* (a raised road believed used for holy processions) can be distinguished pointing toward the top of the Turrialba Volcano in the distance.

Archeologists believe the site was inhabited by as many as 10,000 people from around 1000 B.C. until 100 years or so before the Spanish landed. No one knows why it was abandoned. Admission is US $6. Guides are available and camping is permitted. The only convenient connection to the ruins from Turrialba is on Sunday, when a bus leaves the main terminal at 9 am and returns at 4 pm.

Places to Stay & Eat

Our favorite place to stay in Turrialba is Turrialtico *(8 km/5 miles east of town, ☎ 506/2538-1111, www.turrialtico.com, 14 rooms, restaurant, $$)*, a venerable hotel and restaurant on a hill overlooking the valley on one side and Río Reventazón and its new dam on the other. Since 1968 the García family has run this rustic, two-story wooden lodge

HOTEL PRICE CHART	
Prices are per-night for two people, not including 16% tax	
$	$21-$40
$$	$41-$80
$$$	$81-$125
$$$$	$126-$200
$$$$$	over $200

that has been a favorite of rafters and tourists who return year after year. There's nothing fancy about the small rooms, but the wonderfully delicious restaurant underneath draws many locals at lunch or dinner. The best room is #1, so book it in advance.

More luxurious digs can be had in Casa Turire *(☎ 506/2531-1111, www.hotelcasaturire.com, $$$-$$$$)*, an elegant new plantation mansion/hotel down in the farmlands next to the Reventazón dam and Angostura Lake. The new Swiss owners of this magnificent property have made appealing improvements to the outdoor patio dining area and small figure-eight pool, so an extended stay here is both comfortable and desirable. The bedrooms are all first class, with fine linens and drapes, marble baths and lovely wooden furniture. The international dining offerings are of gourmet quality. Even if you're "roughing" it on the Pacuare River or hiking the volcano, you can relax in comfort at this boutique hotel. A short stretch of very pot-holed road gets you there from the main route out of town.

Casa Turire

West of Town

◆ Heredia

Just 11 km/6.8 miles northwest of San José is the pretty city of Heredia (air-REY-dia), nicknamed the City of Flowers. Founded in 1706, Costa Rica's fourth-largest city was named in honor of a Guatemalan president, Fernadez de Heredia. It is home to four Costa Rican universities. There are good road signs into town from the highway next to the airport. Check out the local web page, www.enheredia.com. Buses Heredianas *(☎ 506/2261-7171)* get your there from San José on Av 2 between Calles 10 and 12.

Church of the Immaculate Conception

The town's central park is filled with trees and is a great place to stroll or sit on a bench and watch people go by, or to attend the band concert every Sunday at 10 am. To the east of it is the impressive Church of the Immaculate Conception, which took 30 years to build (1767-1797). The wait was worth it – its massive towers and walls proved stronger than the earthquakes that have rocked the country since it was built. It has stained glass from Europe and church bells from Cuzco, Peru. Nearby is another imposing fixture, El Fortín, a brick fort with peepholes built backwards. Good thing it never saw action.

El Fortín (Donar Reiskoffer)

The Casa de Cultura, just north of the park, is the 1843 home of ex-president Alfredo Gonzalez. It re-creates the life and home of a coffee baron, the life of peasants during that time, and it also presents local art shows. Another architecturally interesting building here is the 1915 neo-classical, post office (*correo*).

Heredia doesn't have a thriving flower market as its nickname suggests, but does have a wonderful fruit and vegetable *mercado*. It also boasts a number of Spanish-language schools and the University Nacional, a rival to UCR.

Outside of Heredia, the coffee town of San Rafael de Heredia boasts a contemporary gothic-style church (built in 1962), inspired by Notre Dame cathedral, with spires visible from far away

Traditional oxcart at Café Britt

On the way from Heredia to the historic town of Barva, you'll find the Café Britt showroom, office and store *(in US ☎ 800/462-7488, in CR 506/2260-2748, www.cafebritt.com)*. Tours of the roasting plant are offered. There's a good cafeteria and gift shop that are open to the public without taking the tour. What delicious coffee! Open 9-4 daily. Most visitors arrive with

organized tours originating in San José; check with a local travel agent.

La Paz Waterfalls near Vara Blanca are easily accessible from Heredia, as is the Poás Volcano (see page 173).

Places to Stay & Eat

In Heredia you can choose Hotel Valladolid *(Av 7, Calle 7, ☎ 506/2260-2905, fax 2260-2912, www.hotelvalladolid.net, breakfast included, $$-$$$)*, an elegant Spanish-influenced elegant hotel. Budget-conscious travelers can try Hotel Las Flores *(west of the central market, ☎ 506/2261-8147)*, which is clean and neat.

Three other hotels in the heart of downtown also offer excellent value: the largest is Hotel America *(☎ 506/2260-9292)*, then Hotel Ceos *(☎ 506/2262-2628)*, 100 meters/330 feet from Central Park, and finally Hotel Heredia *(☎ 506/2238-0880)*, two blocks north of downtown. Prices run from US $50 (America) down to $20 (Heredia). All have restaurants and cable. See www.hotelamericacr.com.

Hotel Chalet El Tirol *(☎ 506/2267-6222, fax 2267-6373, $$$)* offers a Swiss experience in a misty cloud forest above the city, near Monte de la Cruz Recreation Area. The ride uphill through a cool, heavily scented evergreen forest is exhilarating – and it seems perfectly natural to encounter the chalet's alpine cottages and restaurant at 1,800 meters/5,900 feet above sea level. The vine-covered chalets are charming; some have a slight musty smell.

The best accommodation in the area is Finca Rosa Blanca *(Santa Barbara de Heredia, north of town, ☎ 506/2269-9392, fax 2269-9555, www.finca-rblanca.co.cr, hot tub, free-form pool, $$$$)*. The "White Rose Farm" is a very special, luxury country inn with gorgeous, individually themed rooms. The

Finca Rosa Blanca

main house is a contemporary pueblo design, with curved walls covered by original artwork. Dinner is by reservation in their intimate dining room, and breakfast is included. Seven units in the main house and two private villas, all with superb views of the countryside.

A quiet coffee-farm B&B is Debbie King's Country Inn (☎ 506/2268-3084, www.freewebs.com/debbieking), 10 minutes from Heredia. It has main house rooms or private guesthouses in a lovely setting.

Many visitors to Costa Rica base themselves out of suburban Santo Domingo at the Hotel Bouganvillea *(☎ 506/2244-1414, fax 2244-1313, www.hb.co.cr, restaurant, pool, tennis, cable, $$$-$$$$)*. The Bouganvillea is a boutique hotel with high standards of service, pleasingly large rooms and gorgeous gardens. The pool and tennis courts are set among peaceful flower gardens. This is also a popular hotel for first and last nights in Costa Rica and nearby InBio Park (see page 116). Free shuttle to San José.

Hotel Bougainvillea

Le Petit Paris *(Calle 5, Av 2, ☎ 506/2262-2564, $$)* features French food, especially crêpes, in two fascinating dining rooms – one indoors decorated with art posters and paintings, the other a relaxing covered garden setting. Art shows by aspiring Central American painters are sometimes featured. This recommended restaurant lies in the heart of Heredia at the edge of the college campus.

Bar food can be found at any number of small eateries around the university. One block north is Fresas *(☎ 506/2262-5555)*, featuring good, inexpensive Tico/Italian food and a wood-burning brick oven for pizza. More Tico food is served at Las Tinajas, downtown. A great compliment to a day spent in Heredia is the outdoor, Euopean-style coffee shop, Café Heladería Azzurra at the Casa de Cultura,

a little north of the peaceful Central Park. *Mucho* types of coffees, sandwiches and homemade ice cream.

◆ Alajuela

Four-wheeled oxcarts and four-wheel-drive Land Rovers punctuate Costa Rica's second-largest city. Just three km/1.8 miles from the international airport on the slopes of the Poás Volcano, Alajuela's elevated position makes it slightly warmer and sunnier than San José. Buses leave every few minutes for the airport and Alajuela from Av 2, opposite La Merced Park in San José.

Cathedral in Alajuela (Donar Reiskoffer)

Huge mango trees in the central park reflect the pride Alajuela takes in the delicious tropical fruit. It even hosts a nine-day Mango Festival in July (contact the Tourist Board for exact dates). But the birthday of the city's most famous native son – Juan Santamaría, the little drummer boy who helped defeat the invasion of William Walker – is cause for a celebration on April 11 of each year. It features parades with brass bands, parties, dancing in the streets and drinking in the bars. Juan's statute is in a park that bears his name, two blocks south of Parque Central. Central Park is a good place to start nosing around. It has a big squirrel population in the trees if you don't get enough of them in your home birdfeeders. The cathedral (restored after the 1991 quake) and garden grounds on the east side are open to the public and, on the west side, is the Casa de Cultura, in a municipal palace that dates from 1914. It has lots of local information. On the north side you'll find the Juan Santamaría Museum, which contains art galleries, exhibits from the 1856 War, orchid gardens and clean restrooms. The Museo Historíco Cultural, in the old city jail, is on Calle 2, Av 2. The Central Market, two blocks west of the

park, dates from the 1930s and is a good place to shop, especially on Saturdays when the market becomes like a fiesta. Try some of the many exotic fruits for sale.

One of the best coffee plantations in Costa Rica is 15 km/50 miles outside town on the road to Poas, near La Fraijanes. Watch Starbucks' coffee grow before you drink it at the Doka Coffee Tour *(☎ 506/2449-5152, www.dokaestate.com, reservations required, see page 115*).

A treat for the eyes is an evening performance of Spanish Lippazaner stallions in an "equestrian fantasy" of choreographed riding with dressage, quadrilles, fancy costumes and thrilling horsemanship by both men and women. Ask a local travel agent about performances at Rancho San Miguel, in Alajuela's La Guácima suburb.

Margay mother with baby at Zoo Ave

Also in La Guácima is The Butterfly Farm *(☎ 506/2438-0400, www.butterflyfarm.co.cr)*, a popular place to see and learn about some spectacular butterflies native to Costa Rica (as well as stingless bees). They offer a two-hour guided tour through enclosed tropical gardens. The Zoo Ave *(☎ 506/2433/8989, www.zooave.org)*, which means "bird zoo," is in La Garita, on the road from

Alajuela to Atenas. Its aviaries house a wide variety of birds and also serve as rehabilitation stations for a diversity of native animal life intended for release into the wild. Open daily, 9-5; US $10.

Places to Stay & Eat

Lots of lodgings are available around Alajuela's Central Park and museum. Hotel 1915 *(275 meters/904 feet north of Central Park, ☎ 506/2441-0495, breakfast included, $$)*, built in 1915 and furnished in period, is the best of the bunch. Quiet, with a tasteful ambiance. *La dueña es muy amable* (the female owner is very friendly).

HOTEL PRICE CHART	
Prices are per-night for two people, not including 16% tax	
$	$21-$40
$$	$41-$80
$$$	$81-$125
$$$$	$126-$200
$$$$$	over $200

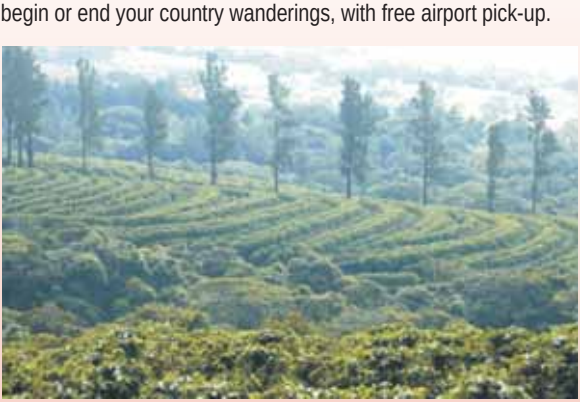
A good value is La Guaria Inn *(100 meters/329 feet south and 125 meters/411 feet east of the cathedral on Av 2, ☎ 506/2440-2948, breakfast included, $)*, a B&B with pleasing rooms. Hostel Mango Verde *(diagonal from the Santamaría Museum on Av 3, ☎ 506/2441-6330, $)* is budget but is also a good value. It has a small lounge.

East of the park is B&B Vida Tropical (*100 meters/330 feet east, 300 meters/1000 feet north of the hospital, across Academia de Natación, ☎ 506/2433-9576, www.vidatropical.com, $).* The "Tropical Life" is pleasant and popular; proof is pinned on its walls in the form of postcards and pictures of guests. It has a lounge and kitchen for guest use.

B&B Vida Tropical

In the Katydid Casita, Pura Vida Hotel

Perhaps the best place near Alajuela is just outside the town, the Pura Vida Hotel (*☎ 506/2430-2929, www.puravidahotel.com, restaurant, $$-$$$*), is a very special and delightful colonial-style hotel set on a former coffee farm (*finca*). It features a large main house known as the Casa and four private casitas set in what guests refer to as a secret garden. There's a studio with a view and rooms in the main house are enhanced with a wonderful garden restaurant. It's a great place to begin or end your country wanderings, with free airport pick-up.



View from Hotel Buena Vista

On the way up the mountain to Poás Volcano, several hotel properties are also well worth a look. American-owned Hotel Buena Vista *(Pilas, 8 km/5 miles north of Alajuela, in US ☎ 800/506-2304, in CR*

☎ 5*06/2442-8595, fax 2442-8701, www.hotelbuenavistacr.com, $$$)* has comfortable rooms with *buenas vistas* – great views – from their balconies. Across the street is the appealing Mediterranean restaurant, Vina Romantica, open from 5-10 pm. Five km from Alejuela is Hotel Orquídeas Inn (*on the old route to Grecia and Poas,* ☎ *506/2433-9346, www.orquideasinn.com, $$-$$$)*, a congenial hotel that features beautiful grounds, attractive rooms and personal attention. Geodesic dome rooms or apartment accommodations. On a bus line.

Orquídeas Inn

Alajuela's cuisine is mostly *Tico típico*, so choose a simple place that appeals to you. The Ambrosia Café (*Av. 3 & Calle 6*) is a pleasant outdoor Italian café, open from 9 to 6, closed Sundays. Veggie types can nosh at Mixto Vegetariano, on the second floor of a building on Av Central, 50 meters/150 feet west of the park. Or the popular Soda Alberto, one block north of Llobet's Department Store (check out the snack bar on the fourth floor). Alberto's offers generous veggie dishes to Tico taste at very reasonable prices. At Gabriel's Soda (*Av. 3, between Calle 4 & 6*), they speak English and serve good food, including *casados* at very good prices. Always dependable is Spoon's, open all day until evening, and the Trigo Miel Bakery Café, across from Santamaría Park, which features sweet treats. Check out the Cafeteria Lemirage (*125 meters/400 feet west of the Juan Santamaria Museum*), where they serve a traditional dish, *tamal asado*, as well as other tasty Tico cuisine. If in-town is too much for you, head up to Hotel Pura Vida for their quiet garden *rancho* restaurant.

◆ Poás Volcano

As volcanoes go, Poás is quite a good one – and a definite must-see on your trip. This broad, tall, semi-conical mountain is a part of the

Poás Volcano

Continental Divide – its eastern slope drains to the Atlantic, and the western slope goes to the Pacific. Poás is only 60 km/37 miles from San José, but a world apart in atmosphere. Like Irazú, it has a fine paved road to the top.

As you climb its broad slopes, plantations with rows of coffee give way to strawberry and onion farms and finally to green dairy pasture before the 5,319-hectare/13,138-acre park covered by moss, bromeliads, epiphytes and wild gorse. It gets much colder as you approach the 2,708-meter (8,883-foot) summit. A new welcome center greets visitors at the path to the 1,320 meter-wide (that's 4,342 feet) active crater (reportedly the widest in the world) that surrounds a deep, turquoise-blue lake. A wooden viewing platform lets you look down at the surreal landscape in the crater and its windswept lake. Several vents send steam and gas into the wind. Clouds sweep across your path suddenly, enveloping you in thick fog and blowing away just as quickly with the breeze. Dress for the cold, but use layers, as it can also get warm in the bright sun.

The crater that holds the lake is the fifth vent created during Poás' active life. Hiking trials fork off from the paved road, leading to Lake Botos, a deep lake in the third, inactive, crater that's surrounded by thick vegetation. The fast way to the top from San José is straight through Alajuela from the highway near the airport. Follow the road through Pilas to Poasito and up you go. There are signs, so you won't get lost (if you're going downhill, you're going the wrong way).

Since you probably rushed up to arrive before clouds socked in the mountaintop, consider going back down a more scenic route by turning left at Poasito through Vara Blanca, then down to Birrí, Barva to Heredia. This route passes close to La Paz Waterfalls (see page 115).

Places to Eat & Stay

The last hamlet on the way to up the volcano is Poasito, 11 km/seven miles from the summit, where a right turn leads to La Paz Waterfalls and, eventually, Heredia. A kilometer or less bbefore the turn, on the left, is a cute little restaurant with lace curtains, La Casona de Doña Julia *($)*, our favorite place for *batidos*, especially when strawberries are in season.

HOTEL PRICE CHART	
Prices are per-night for two people, not including 16% tax	
$	$21-$40
$$	$41-$80
$$$	$81-$125
$$$$	$126-$200
$$$$$	over $200

On our return trip back down we usually turn left here for a scenic route through Heredia back to San José. At the junction is the meaty La Churrasco Restaurant and Lodge *(☎ 506/2482-2135, $$)*, a pleasingly rustic and popular stop. Follow our car wheels on this route to stay at the stunning Poás Volcano Lodge *(on the road from Poasito to Vara Blancas, ☎ 506/2482-2194, fax 2482-2513, www.poas-volcanolodge.com*, $$), built by an English family as the principal house for their dairy farm on the cloud-shrouded slopes. Stone walls, reading areas and a sunken fireplace in this large but intimate home make it feel as if it's your own comfortable house. The simple, immaculately clean and appealing rooms are decorated with souvenirs from travels around the world. The sociable owner converted the former stables to wonderful intimate rooms and expanded the accommodations in 2005 to include individual chalets. This is one of favorite lodges (and he makes his own wine, too!). Say hello to Michael for us.

Poás Volcano Lodge

As you continue you'll come to the turn for La Paz Waterfall (see page 115), a short distance down a road that would take you across

La Paz Waterfall

the surprisingly small country to Caribbean side and Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí. It's a fascinating drive. However, if you're hungry for fine food, keep going 400 meters/1200 feet east of the junction to Restaurant Colbert *(☎ 506/2482-2776, $$)*, nestled on a rise above the road, overlooking dairy farms on the volcano's slopes from wide picture windows. It has great views, linen napery, excellent presentation and superb French food from chef Frances. Another spot worth considering for a bite to eat or an overnight in an individual hillside rustic chalet room (with romantic wood burning stoves) is Mi Casita Restaurant & Cabanas (*Vara Blanca, ☎ 506/2482-2629, $*). The owner, Emily, speaks English because she is English.

You can do this route in reverse order if you come up to Poás from Heredia. Hold the book upside down.

Coffee Country

The agricultural area west of San José is rich farmland and, because of its climate and altitude, a great coffee-growing region. The towns scattered along this route are friendly, quaint and untouristy – yet with much for tourists to see. We often make this trip – Alajuela, Grecia, Sarchí, Naranjo, then either Zarcero or San Ramón or both – into a day or overnight journey to wander the country lanes. You can continue along the scenic route to La Fortuna and Arenal. Reach these towns by side roads or go quickly via the Inter-American Highway. Although not on a direct driving loop through coffee country, we include the town of Atenas here, which is located southeast of Grecia on one of the routes to the Pacific Coast, because it is very attractive but doesn't fit anywhere else.

◆ Grecia

Two Grecia residents

There are pleasant back roads from Alajuela, through Tacares, to Grecia, but if you're heading directly from San José, take the Inter-American Highway for 34 km/21 miles and turn at the Greek columned sign. The residents call themselves Greeks (*Greigos*) because of the town's unusual name, and many of them have added columns to their porches in an imitation of Greek architectural styles. However, what distinguishes the village of Grecia most is its award for being the "Cleanest City in Latin America." It is. The center of town is dominated by the metal-clad Cathedral de la Mercedes, a red brick church made of metal panels that were imported from Belgium in 1897. The interior is equally ornate.

Cathedral de la Mercedes

At the Mundo de las Serpientes

Five minutes east of town is the well-run Mundo de las Serpientes, World of Snakes (☎ *506/2494-3700*), in the village of Poró. Admission to this interesting stop is about US $12. It has dozens of snake varieties behind glass in outdoor cages. Guides will allow you to handle some of the less deadly species.

Places to Stay

In town, accommodations start and end with the worthwhile Hotel Aeromundo (*one block behind the church, ☎ 506/2494-0094, www.aerotess@rasca.co.cr, cable, breakfast included, $)*, with rooms as well as three furnished apartments. They also offer a very good travel agency. Tell them we sent you.

In the surrounding hills are several good hotels. Follow the many signs to B&B Posada Mimosa (*off the main road, ☎ 506/2494-5868, www.mimosa.co.cr, cable, pool, breakfast, $$)*. The location has an infinty pool with stunning mountaintop views of peaceful farmland. They offer attractive rooms, a four-person suite and cabins, plus a house that's available for groups or long-term rental.

Posada Mimosa

A true gem of a hotel is the Vista del Valle Plantation Inn *(Rosaria, ☎ /fax 506/2451-1165, www.vistadelvalle.com, tennis, pool, breakfast included, $$$$)*. This luxury inn is surrounded by coffee *fincas* and orange groves bordering the Río Grande Canyon Nature Reserve. It features sweeping views of the valley, as its name implies. Japanese-style cottages are simple but elegant, with private balconies. The com-

Pool at Vista del Valle Plantation Inn

fort, peace and tranquility they exude is enhanced by lush tropical gardens.

◆ Atenas

Atenas, the Spanish word for Athens, is a semi-rural farming community with what *National Geographic* named, the "Best Climate in the World." You'll stop here if you take the Tico Train Tour from San José to Puntarenas. Besides its great climate, Atenas' claims to fame include the Monument to the *Boyero* (ox cart driver), an earthquake fault that runs through town, a stuffed grapefruit dessert specialty called *toronja rellena*, and spectacular, twisty mountain roads in and out of town. We thoroughly enjoyed staying north of town, in Santa Eulalia on the road to Orotina, at El Cafetal Inn (*☎ 506/2446-5785, www.cafetal.com, pool, breakfast included, $$*). The congenial owners and hosts, Romy and Lee Rodriguez, built a modern hacienda mansion surrounded by pretty gardens and coffee plants (their "La Negrita" roast, named after their daughter, is excellent). Photos of the house's construction show that the land around it was once cleared for cattle, but hard work and a few years have made it verdant again. It's a pleasure to relax here. El Cafetal is close enough to the airport to make it a good place to get your feet wet in the country or to stay for a last goodnight. Good food, too (see below).

El Cafetal pool area

The road through Atenas to Orotina and the Pacific coast twists and turns along steep mountain sides. Don't miss the cliffside restaurant, Mirador del Cafetal, owned by the innkeepers of El Cafetal Inn. It offers a well-stocked gift shop, spectacular views of the valley below, excellent food and soups to die for. We mean that – absolutely super soups – especially *sopa Azteca*, a chicken vegetable soup with strips of tortilla.

◆ Sarchí

If anywhere in Costa Rica can claim to be an arts and crafts center, it is the town of Sarchí. This small village, divided into two by the Río Trojas, is located in a deep valley 30 km/18.6 miles northwest of Alajuela. Coffee and farm fields line the valley walls but its fame is founded on the manufacturing of oxcarts (*carretas*). Back in the 18th century, oxen were used to haul multi-purpose, heavy-duty, two-wheeled carts up and down Costa Rica's rough roads and farm trails. In Sarchí, artisans perfected the design and began painting them – solid wood wheels and all – in bright, multicolored intricate designs. The carts have become a national symbol and are still in use in rural areas.

Hand-painted oxcart

Today, Sarchí woodworkers make furniture and endless useful and decorative items from tropical hardwoods. Leather craftsmen have joined them and the town now fills with tourists and Tico shoppers who move from workroom to gallery to store, searching out bargains. If you see something you like, a rocking chair or a full-size oxcart (they also make small-scale versions and miniatures), they'll pack it and ship it for you.

LA CARRETA SIN BUEYES

If you wake up early in the pre-dawn and hear the creak of oxcart wheels pass in the dark, it may be the Carreta sin Bueyes, the Oxcart without Oxen. When San José was being built, a young man stole the lumber meant for the city's first church. He built himself a beautiful oxcart, but didn't count on the divine intervention of St. Joseph, the carpenter. When the thief died he was condemned forever to ride his oxcart alone through the early morning countryside.

Facing page: Close-up of oxcart wheel (Wildrose)

Fábrica de Carretas Joaquín Chaverri has been making hand-painted oxcarts since 1903. They now have a souvenir shop at the southern end of town, as well as Restaurant Las Carretas *(☎ 506/2454-1633)*, serving traditional Tico food. The idea is to wander and check out the many shops scattered around the city center. Try to see the town's church, which looks like an eye-popping cake, painted pink and peacock-blue.

Restaurante El Rio *(☎ 506/2454-4980)*, in the Centro Turistico gift shop, serves typical Tico food. Mexican dishes can be had at La Troja del Abuelo, but the Restaurant La Finca, at the north end of town, may do it best. Pleasant, serene surroundings. Stay in town at Villa Sarchí Lodge *(☎ 06/2454-4596, 800 m north of the Shell gas station, pool, cable, $$)*.

A side trip from Sarchí to the Catarata del Toro (Bull's Waterfall) can be refreshing. Take the road across from the Chaverri Oxcart Factory and follow the signs. The 200-meter/658-foot falls, allegedly the highest in Costa Rica (according to the owner), cascades down on your left, seven km/4.3 miles past the town of Bajos de Toro. You can't see it from the road, but there are three overlooks on the half-mile hike downhill to its base (entry fee is around US $1). The first half of the route is an easy walk, but the second half is fairly strenuous. There's a very appealing little restaurant here with inexpensive, clean rooms above. They always have rooms available.

Catarata del Toro

◆ Naranjo

Naranjo is the next town you'll reach. Sleepy, small, agricultural, rural, a crossroads, a gateway – Naranjo is all of these. But its also a jumping-off point for Tropical Bungee *(☎ 506/2248-2212, www.bungee.co.cr)*, where jumping off the nearby Río Colorado bridge is exhilarating by any stretch of the imagination. Tropical offers trans-

portation from San José, as do Costa Rica Bungee and Rappel Adventures *(☎ 506/2494-5102)*. Try a night jump – wow! Or rappel deep into the Colorado gorge with either company for about US $20 (equipment and instructor included). This is great adventure – technically thrilling yet not too difficult for beginners. Afterward, you can ascend the cliff face or hike back up a trail. The Serendipity Tours' hot-air balloon leaves from this area as well *(US & Canada ☎ 877/507/1358, CR 506/2558-1000, www.serendipityadventures.com)*.

Thirteen km/eight miles west of Naranjo on the road to Zarcero is Restaurante El Mirador, which offers good Tico food and fabulous views of Tico land. From here your choice is visiting the large towns of San Ramon and Palmares (famous for its fiesta in January) or the topiary town of Zarcero to the north. You can cut your circuit short by getting back on the Inter-American Highway in San Ramon, or take the twisty road from there up through cheese country north to La Fortuna/Arenal. From Zarcero you can push on to Cuidad Quesada, then to Arenal, or loop around Platanar and Poás volcanoes on a little-used paved road, back past La Paz waterfalls to Heredia/Alejuela. It's a long ride, but very interesting.

◆ Zarcero

North from Naranjo is Zarcero, a little valley agricultural town famous for its cool weather, pine trees, organic veggies, peach jam, dairy farms, homemade cheese and the charming topiary garden in front of the town's white and red church. In 1960, gardener Don Evangelisto Blanco began to trim the bushes in Parque Francisco Alvardo into fanciful shapes – elephants, birds, rabbits, oxen and cart, a monkey on a motorcycle and even a tunneled walkway with sides like giant Hershey's Kisses. Don claimed God told him which

In the Parque Francisco Alvardo

shapes to create. He deserves a medal for his outstanding work. Take a walk through this verdant fantasy land.

Tiny Hotel Don Beto *(☎ 506/2463-3137, www.hoteldonbeto.com)*, next to the church, is good for an overnight in town. It's very clean and comfy, with two rooms that share a bath and two with private baths. On a hilltop south of town roadside stands offer homemade cheeses and fruit preserves. Look there for La Cocina de Turno de Doña, a rustic kitchen that features homemade soups and stews, slow cooked over a wood-burning stove. A lovely place to stay 3.5 km north of town is Cabinas La Pradera (☎ 506/2463-3959, www.cabinaslapradera.com). Inexpensive, comfortable and quiet; it's a proud Laguna de Zarcero community project. Homestyle.

Cabinas La Pradera

Arenal and the central north are reached by two common routes: the first runs north through Zarcero to Quesada (San Carlos) and then on to La Fortuna. Another way is from San Ramón north through San Lorenzo and La Tigra to La Fortuna.

◆ San Ramón

The heavily agricultural city of San Ramón is famous for its Saturday Farmers Market in the center of town. People from all over the valley come here to barter, and the atmosphere is festival-like when the weather is good.

The Catedral de San Ramón, on the square, is modern, despite its pseudo-Baroque style. On the north side of Parque Central is the 1893 Palacio Municipal (admission is free, open 9-4), built in the style of a Spanish mansion and complete with high ceilings and an inner courtyard. Admission is free to next door's student-run San Ramón Museum, and interesting and quaint distraction. If you're around in January, take a detour into the nearby town of Palmares for the rodeos, celebrations and parades of the Fiesta de Palmares.

Cathedral of San Ramón (Sssteven)

San Ramón Central Park (Sssteven)

The area's biggest attraction is the private, 809-hectare/2,000-acre Los Angeles Cloud Forest (☎ *506/2228-4603)*, 20 km/12.4 miles north of town. Owned by ex-President Rodrigo Carazo, and his wife, Estrella, this little-known ecological paradise is a good alternative to Monteverde. It's close enough to be done as a day-trip from San José. LA is a delight for hikers, eco-minded tourists and birders interested in seeing a quetzal, the colorful national bird. Cloud forests get moisture more from the fog-like clouds that sweep up the mountainside, depositing dew. A naturalist offers tours and explains the

diverse eco-system (English and Spanish), twice daily (9 am, 1 pm, US $25).

Places to Stay

HOTEL PRICE CHART	
Prices are per-night for two people, not including 16% tax	
$	$21-$40
$$	$41-$80
$$$	$81-$125
$$$$	$126-$200
$$$$$	over $200

Hotel Villablanca *(☎ 506/2228-4603, www.villablanca-costarica.com, $$$)* began its life as the retreat of former President Rodrigo Carazo Odio, founder of the University of Peace. Its bungalows are built in adobe style and beautifully decorated inside, each with its own fireplace – warmly reassuring when the temperature drops. Floors are tiled, as is the vaulted ceiling of the striking Mariana Wedding Chapel. They offer a comfortable, guided nature hike and other tours into the bordering Los Angeles Cloud Forest. This property is owned by the same people as Si Como No Hotel in Manuel Antonio.

Hotel Villablanca

In a hidden valley, 30 minutes north of San Ramón on the way to Arenal Volcano, is Hotel Valle Escondido *(San Lorenzo, ☎ 506/2577-1000, 31 rooms, pool, restaurant, jacuzzi, canopy slide, $$-$$$)*. This 101-hectare/250-acre private reserve sits on the floor of a steep valley whose walls are lush with vegetation. Great for a get-away-from-it-all vacation. Indulge in nature activities or relax and let nature come to you.

◆ Ciudad Quesada (San Carlos)

The northern region around Quesada, formerly known as San Carlos, lies southeast of Arenal, where mountain slopes transit from the drier north to the hot and humid tropics of the Atlantic side. A loop from San José – through the coffee towns to Quesada, over to

Aguas Zarcas and the eastern side of Poás Volcano, and then finally back through Heredia past La Paz Waterfalls – can be a great drive done in a single long day, or two or more if you want to stop and explore.

Quesada is down in a lush grassland valley at only 650 meters/2,138 feet above sea level. It is the agricultural capital of the north, famous for its delicious string-like cheese. However, it was not renamed for the Spanish word for cheese, *queso*, but to honor the poet, Napoleon Quesada. Several very enticing properties offer bases from which to explore the area, including Arenal and the north, or Rara Avis and La Selva (see the *Caribbean Coast* chapter, pages 333-366) to the east.

AUTHOR NOTE: All of the delightful hotels below are set outside of town in the native territory of the beautiful green macaw, now in danger of extinction.

Places to Stay

Ten minutes northeast of the city, Termales del Bosque *(☎ 506/2460-4740, www.termalesdelbosque.com, restaurant, breakfast included, $$)* offer what their name implies: relaxing hot springs in a forest. The natural spa consists of several warm mineral pools in the shade next to a bubbling stream. There's a canopy tour too. Non-smoking cabins. Hotel La Garza *(☎ 506/2475-5222, www.hotellagarza.com, pool, restaurant, $$-$$$),* north of Ciudad Quesada, is a 304-hectare/750-acre working hacienda that offers cute cabins, horseback riding, tours of local attactions, plus nearby La Garza Biological Reserve.

Termales del Bosque

In the community of La Gloria, near Aguas Zarcas, is Albergue San Juan *(☎ 506/2259-3401, $)*, a cultural cooperative with rustic cabins. You can take a tours of their protected rainforest and medicinal plant gardens, or hike to see green macaw nests. Upscale

Tilajari Resort *(☎ 506/2469-9091, www.tilajari.com, pool, tennis, restaurant, $$-$$$)* near Muelle, is a country club in the country, with spacious rooms, big pool and popular tennis courts. Lovely grounds and excellent restaurant.

Tilajari Resort

The most remote of all these lodges is La Laguna del Lagarto Lodge *(☎ 506/2289-8163, www.lagarto-lodge-costa-rica.com, restaurant, $$)*, which sits north of Pital and Boca Tapada, not far from the Nicaraguan border. It's a naturalist's and eco-tourist's paradise set way out of the way. More than 90% of owner Vinzenz Schmack's 500 hectares/1,235 acres of land are forested, with a well-maintained trail system. Several lagoons can be explored via canoe.

La Laguna del Lagarto Lodge

North by Northwest

This section of the country contains arid land and sprawling cattle ranches, a windswept lake, forest preserves shrouded in clouds, deep caves with thousands of bats, mangrove swamps, indigenous Indian reserves, active volcanoes, flat land, deep valleys, mountains and a shoreline pounded by waves. The territory borders Nicaragua to the north and the Central Valley to the south. For organizational purposes, the area we are covering in this section looks somewhat like a slice of pizza with one end of the crust at Santa Rosa Park on the Pacific, and the other at Los Chiles border crossing. The pointy end is above San Ramón and Zarcero. The slice covers most of Guanacaste and Alajuela provinces.

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Arenal Area

◆ Arenal Volcano

La Fortuna & Arenal *(Dieter Jungblut)*

Arenal is the most active volcano in the western hemisphere and its presence dominates the northern town of La Fortuna. If Poás and Irazú have only whetted your appetite for volcanoes, Arenal will make you

drool. The farmland around is a deep green, primary and secondary forests blanket the midlands, and towering above it all is classically cone-shaped Arenal – smoking, rumbling, spewing car-sized boulders and spitting red-hot lava that lights up the night sky (when it's not covered in clouds and raining, that is). There are no guarantees that you'll even get to see the volcano's summit. One time we were here it rained and was cloudy for four days straight.

Arenal began its life about 4,000 years ago and grew to 1,633 meters/5,372 feet in height from near continuous eruptions until just be-

fore the Conquest. Then it went silent and allowed nature to cover it with forests and vegetation. So everyone forgot it was a volcano until a few small fumaroles opened at its summit in 1938, then again in 1958 and 1960. In 1967 the water temperature of the Río Tabacón, a spring-fed river than descends the slopes of Arenal, suddenly rose. It was a warning of danger, but so few people lived in the area that it went unheeded. At 7:30 am on July 29, 1968, Arenal Volcano erupted with a pyroclastic flow that raced down the mountainside and incinerated the villages of Tabacón and Pueblo Nuevo – taking the lives of 78 townspeople. Huge incandescent boulders exploded out of the cone, halfway up the mountain, and left large craters as far as 10 km/6.2 miles away.

Things are much quieter today, but Arenal can still be deadly. During the summer of 2000, an eruption flowed down a crevice and enveloped a young American woman, her daughter and a Costa Rican guide while they were on a hike at the edge of the safety zone. All three were badly burned. Sadly, the guide died two days later; the girl a short time after.

Adventures

Hikers are now prohibited from getting as close as they did, but the element of danger, however small, is what transforms a visit to Arenal from an interesting ecological attraction to a thrilling adventure experience. Just the idea that you are so close to its deadly power makes a stay memorable.

The town of La Fortuna is six km/four miles from the mountain, which is clearly visible from the town's main square. A road leading northwest around the volcano toward the lake is home to many lodges and hotels, and it's these places that offer the best views of Arenal. Unfortunately, clouds and rain often cover the volcano. Be patient – the wind will blow them away sooner or later. When it's quiet at night, listen for the growl and rumble.

KABOOM

Bet you didn't know that eruptions are classified by their sound and described by onomatopoeias. Kabooms are brief violent eruptions that throw boulders and blobs of lava into the air and shake the ground in their intensity. A whoosh shoots lava and ash in the sky; the sound is like a jet engine. Chugs are rhythmic expulsions of gas from the lava fountains.

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Lastly, don't miss a dip in the warm waters of the Tabacón River. The classiest way to enjoy them is to go to the Tabacón Resort & Spa and swim in their pools or in the stream itself. A less-expensive (under US $8) swimming pool spa, Baldi Termae, is on the way there. Another option is the low-cost pool, Las Fuentes, just past the Tabacón Spa entrance, which has facilities. Even farther up the road is a free spot in the stream. It's not marked, but there are usually a couple of cars on the left.

It is said that only 10 people out of three million have a chance to see a volcanic eruption, and only four out of three million see a lava flow. At Arenal, if the Guatuso god of fire wills it, you have a chance to see both.

> WARNING: Don't be stupid and try to hike close to the volcano. In 1988, Steven Simmler, a young American, was carbonized by an eruption while trying to climb to the top.

◆ La Fortuna

With clean, fresh air and beautiful countryside, the town of La Fortuna has been discovered in no small way by ecological and adventure tourists. It feels a bit like either a college or frontier town, depending on your perspective, with many happening bars and restaurants and numerous pleasant hotels in a variety of price ranges. A rash of hotel break-ins have recently plagued the town.

From San José, take the Autotransportes San José-San Carlos bus, about a 4½-hour ride, from Calle 12, between Av 7 & 9.

Adventures

There are more active adventures than bathing in the hot springs or watching the active volcano. Whitewater rafting is big in the area on the Toro and Peñas Blancas rivers,

On the Río Toro (Desafío Adventure Center)

both of which have some excellent Class III and IV (even Class V) rapids.

La Fortuna Waterfalls, southwest of town toward Chachagua and a long walk from downtown, is a popular trip for the steady of feet. A US $6 entrance fee (bring your swimsuit) sets you out on a very steep hike down slippery steps cut into the jungle cliff. At the bottom the water pounds down from an impressive height. Don't swim at its base, where the powerful water rate can be deadly. Instead, head just around the corner, where the steam widens and you can enjoy swimming in the warm swift water. Do not leave valuables in your car here.

Canyoneering (Desafio Adventure Center)

Guided hikes, such as the one to La Fortuna Waterfall, mountain biking trips, or a visit to explore the Venado Cavern, can be arranged with local adventure tour agencies. BoBo Adventures (*in La Amistad Hotel, ☎ 506/2479-9112, www.boboadventures.com*) specializes in cave tours. Contact any of the following well-established local tour agencies for more eco-adventure activities in the area: Desafío Adventure Center (*☎ 506/2479-9464, www.desafiocostarica.com* Aguas Bravas (*☎ 506/2479-9025, www.aguas-bravas.com*) raft the Rio Toro; Sunset Tours (*☎ 506/2479-9800, www.sunsettourscr.com*); and Aventuras Arenal (*☎ 506/2479-9133, www.arenaladventures.com*). Canopy tours, hanging bridges, hikes and zip lines abound in Costa Rica and this popular tourist area is no exception. Put on your adventure boots and enjoy!

There's also horseback riding, including a ride over the mountain to Monteverde (skip during the rainy season) or one to the nearby extinct cinder cone volcano, Cerro Chato (1,100 meters/3,618 feet). By car, take an educational side trip to the Guatuso Indian Reserve near San Rafael de Guatuso, north of La Fortuna. There isn't too much to see, but the Indians need the money tourism brings. If you're there during a traditional ceremony, you'll be lucky enough to see their colorful native costume.

If you're fortunate enough to be in La Fortuna on a weekend, take off your hiking boots, put on your dancing shoes and head for Volcan Look *(☎ 506/2479-6961)*, a huge disco a short distance from town on the road toward Tabacón. Put 200 people on the dance floor and it still looks empty. Bar is open Wednesday through Saturday.

Places to Stay & Eat

ON THE WAY IN

Chachagua Rain Forest Lodge *(12 km/8 miles outside Chachagua, ☎ 506/2468-1010, fax 2468-1020, www.chachagua rainforesthotel.com, 22 rooms, pool, restaurant, pick-up service, conference facility, $$$)*. While everyone goes to hotels in Fortuna or Arenal, a short side trip leads to this really appealing private lodge just below a rainforest. Individual rustic cabins speckle the landscaped gardens where streams splash down from the mountaintop. Each good-size cabin boasts a large wooden porch for sitting and birdwatching. They are made of natural wood, with memorably big, bright and airy bathrooms, lush plants and lots of light. The wooden deck restaurant (everything they prepare is grown on the farm, except the seafood) boasts a bar. It is a 20-minute walk to a five-meter/16-foot waterfall where you can swim, or a two-hour hike up to the mountaintop – Wellington boots supplied. One of the main activities at Chachagua (pronounced cha-CHAG-wa) is horseback riding. Their lodge stables 10 horses, including Spanish stallions, that ride in festivities all over Costa Rica. Breakfast is not included, but you should negotiate for it.

Chachagua Rain Forest Lodge

Arenal Country Inn *(Arenal-Chachagua Road, ☎ 506/2283-0101, fax 2280-7340, www.arenalcountryinn.com, air, room safe, pool, terrace, breakfast included, $$$$)*. Once a working hacienda,

Arenal Country Inn

this appealing country inn consists of rooms in attractive duplex tropical cottages that are painted pumpkin and gold and covered with a red metal roof. Cottages are scattered around the lovely gardens in the flatlands beneath the volcano. The large reception area is open-air, under a big roof where the former cattle barn was. It has a small breakfast area, recreation area with a pool table and reading area with wicker furniture. The outdoor free-form pool is large and inviting. You are only one kilometer from La Fortuna town. Plus, a river runs through it – Robert Redford, take note.

UNDERWORLD CONNECTIONS

The Venado (deer) cave entrance was discovered in 1945 on a private farm in the rural town of Venado (about 10 km/six miles north of La Fortuna) by following a stream that flows from its mouth. The interior is undeveloped, without railings or cement walkways, and no enlarged headroom where the cave roof drops to under two meters/6.6 feet. Resident cave dwellers include a large colony of bats (not always hanging out), tarantulas, big crickets and the occasional snake. Be prepared to get dirty – rubber boots, hard hats, flashlights and face masks are supplied by tour operators who run trips here.

IN TOWN

La Fortuna offers the best opportunity to stay close to the volcano without paying extra for the nighttime view, but lock valuables in the hotel safe. Well-established Hotel San Bosco *(☎ 506/2479-9050, www.arenal-volcano.com, pool, jacuzzi, $$)* is on a side street near the square, next to Desafío Tours. Beautiful gardens and grounds

surround this quiet modern hotel known for its cleanliness. Their small blue pool is inviting and the adjacent jacuzzi sits under a shady overhang. All the rooms are new, built in response to the huge increase in tourists that now flock to La Fortuna. Sand tiles, white walls, cherry trim, Italian ice-colored quilted bedspreads, porch. Across the street is the Cabinas Las Tinajas *(☎ 506/2479-9308, $)*, a tiny, four-room motel-like accommodation. It features clean rooms and baths, a patio porch and very low prices. Behind them is a fish farm that raises Tlapia. This is a quiet spot, but it comes with bragging rights that you found the best value in town.

Hotel San Bosco

A La Fortuna standard that fills up fast is Luigi's Lodge & Pizzeria *(☎ 506/2479-9909, fax 2479-9898, air, pool, spa, jacuzzi, restaurant, breakfast, $$$)*, opposite Restaurant Las Brasitas on the road to the volcano. This is the largest and best of in-town hotels, with a pizza and Italian restaurant that is always crowded. Hotel Arenal Jireh *(☎ 506/2479-9004, www.arenalexperience.com, air, cable, $-$$)* is an appealing six-room hotel on the corner, one block closer to the square. Pool and Bible provided. Next door, La Amistad Inn *(☎ 506/2479-9364*, $) offers basic rooms.

Hotel Arenal Jireh

For a small place, try Don Manuel Inn *(☎ 506/2479-9585, donmanuel@racsa.co.cr, breakfast, $)*, with simple rooms, some that share a bath. Two other basic accommodations with a little extra are Cabinas MonteReal *(☎ 506/2479-9357, cable, $)*, 50 m/150 feet west and 100 m/300 feet south of the school. A half-block away is Mayol Lodge *(☎ 506/2479-9110, $)*, which has a pool.

For small and quiet, you won't find better than Cabinas La Riviera *(☎ 506/2479-9048, $),* a basic little cabana hotel several blocks east of Hotel San Bosco. Individual cabins are set in manicured gardens filled with birds and butterflies, with the river just behind the hibiscus hedges. It's very appealing, but out of the way.

Las Cabinitas Resort

Las Cabanitas Resort *(☎ 506/2479-9400, breakfast, $$$)*, is just east of downtown. Las Cabanitas is classy. It features a large free-form pool, a restaurant called Arara (tasty food) and large lovely hardwood bungalows with tiled roofs. Dollar for quality, this is a best buy. If they're full, check out Villa Fortuna, also very good (and a tad cheaper), next door.

There are many small restaurants in town. One of the most popular – for good reason – is Lava Rocks Café, a hip open-air restaurant under a clear canopy roof. Large menu, gift shop, green plants, and good food, it's located opposite the park square on the main drag. For the best value seafood restaurant, head to Nene's Restaurant, one block off the main road, east of the square park. You can always ask a local for directions – everyone eats there. A favorite of the backpacking crowd is Soda La Parada, a clean and tasty soda opposite the bus stop and park square. Good cheap Tico eats can be had at Soda El Rio, which backs against the rushing river, a block south. They also have three basic rooms for about US $30 *(☎ 506/2479-9341).*There is also a Wall's Ice Cream shop facing the park square to the north. Heading toward the volcano a few

blocks, Las Brasitas features wood-fire roasted chicken and Tico-Mex specialities.

AT THE FOOT OF THE MOUNTAIN

Every time we come to Arenal there is a new hotel springing up on former dairy pasture and hills at the base of the volcano. If there's lodging here, you can be sure it has a view. The following hotels are not in any particular order, either geographically or qualitatively.

AUTHOR NOTE: Be sure to ask the front desk of your hotel for a wake-up call if the sky is clear and there's a nighttime flow.

Volcano Lodge *(in US ☎ 866/208-9809, in CR 506/2460-6080, fax 2460-6020, www.volcano-lodge.com, 65 rooms, air, pool, jacuzzi, restaurant, breakfast included, $$-$$$)*. Owned by the same family who own Sunset Tours and the Hotel San Bosco in town, this pretty lodge on a hill features large rooms with big picture windows and comfortable beds. Each of the 10 tile-roof duplex bungalows has a little garden, a patio and a good view of the volcano. The restaurant serves Tico food in an *al fresco* dining area. In 2006, it expanded to 65 rooms, two pools and a jacuzzi. Behind the lodge, up a dirt road, is the Cabinas Palo Verde *(☎ 506/2479-9306, $$)*, rustic cabins on a farm.

Volcano Lodge

Tabacón Resort *(☎ 506/2460-2020, fax 2256-15000, www.tabacon.com, pool, 2 restaurants, 95 rooms & suites, air, cable, health spa, $$$$, breakfast included)* is our splurge accommodation at the base of the volcano. This luxury hotel complex is located up the hill from the warm Tabacón River, where they have built an elaborate spa. In the last few years, Tabacón has gone very upscale and is now a luxury spa resort.The rooms are large and attractive, with a great nighttime view of the volcano from either balconies or garden patios. But the best reason of all for staying here is to use the spa

Tabacón Resort

(your room rate includes unlimited access). Warm swimming pools, one with a swim-up bar and cement tube slide, are very popular, as is the stream that features a natural waterfall with a ledge to sit under. The volcano heats the pools and river and it's great to go in the evening and see steam rise from the bathtub-warm river. Open to the public (US $60/day), the spa offers free changing rooms and towels (tips accepted).

If you're not staying at the hotel and want to visit the spa, which has mud baths and massages by appointment, it's best to make a reservation for entrance and/or dinner, especially in high season. The restaurant at the spa overlooks the volcano (on a clear day, watch the boulders roll down) and river. It's a good choice for buffet or à la carte dining. Fifty meters/164 feet down the road on the right is their lower-cost warm-water pool, Las Fuentes, where locals go. It's more like an open garden area. There is a swimming pool and changing rooms, but most visitors sit in the warm waterfalls of the stream. The advantage is that it's less crowded and costs less, but it has fewer facilities. About a half a kilometer farther down the road you may find cars parked on the left. This is the entrance to a free swimming hole in the warm river.

Arenal Lodge *(200 meters/658 feet after Arenal Lake Dam, ☎ 506/2253-5080, fax 2460-1881, www.arenallodge.com, restaurant, full breakfast included, $$-$$$).* If you ever wondered what was above the clouds, turn into the entrance of Arenal Lodge, just over the dam at the east end of the lake. Half the fun of Arenal Lodge (not to be confused with Arenal Observatory Lodge) is driving up their very good – but very steep – road through the cloud forest. Four-wheel-drive is strongly recommended. The lodge's economy rooms (*sans* view) are pleasant, with one queen and one single bed. If it's rainy season, which is actually high season around Arenal, you won't miss not having a view from your room. The pop-

View from Arenal Lodge

ular junior suites are very large and comfortably appointed, with wooden balconies that overlook tropical gardens, with the lake and the volcano in the distance. Fruit bird feeders in the gardens attract scores of colorful song and hummingbirds. Swiss-style chalets, complete with fireplaces and balconies, sit on the very crest of the mountaintop. They cost just a little more than the junior suites. Free shuttle bus to the hot springs and La Fortuna town.

Los Lagos Hotel & Spa *(☎ 506/2461-1818, www.hotelloslagos.com, $$$)* is the hotel closest to the volcano's active side and lava flow. You won't believe how close until you hike up to the observatory, which you can do even if you're not staying here (just look out your window if you are). Signs abound for emergency exit routes – how exciting! Rooms in villas, two restaurants, a water splash park for kids, plus a butterfly farm, crocodile zoo, and aquarium. No crocs allowed in the big pool.

Los Lagos Hotel & Spa

Other properties on the road uphill include Montaña de Fuego *(☎ 506/2460-1220, www.montanadefuego.com, $$$)* and Hotel Arenal Paraíso *(☎ 506/2460-5333, www.arenalparaiso.com, $$)*.

Montaña was the first of these side-by-side hilltop *casita* hotels, both owned by the same family. They offer large cabins, a glass porch restaurant at Montaña and unobstructed volcano views. Arenal Paraíso is the newer of the two, with wooden cabins and decks. Arenal Vista Lodge *(in US ☎ 888/790-5264, in CR 506/2231-4947, www.arenalvistalodge.com, $$)* has a great vista of Arenal, with simple connected rooms on a hilltop. You can't miss it.

Arenal Observatory Lodge

If you get a hankering for a good steak or just a hearty meal someplace other than your hotel, try the Mirador Arenal Steakhouse, opposite the Lavas Tacotal Hotel. It features big views from big glass windows and fine food in a rustic chic setting that some might call romantic.

On your way around the volcano to the lake, turn left for the National Park and Arenal Observatory Lodge *(☎ 506/2290-7011, www.arenal-observatory.co.cr, $$$-$$$$)*, a former farm on the base of the volcano. It was converted into a lodge in 1973 for the volcanologists from the Smithsonian Institution. This well-known hotel, which has a close, bird's-eye view of Arenal, is protected from a lava flow by the Agua Caliente River gorge. Located within the national park and bordering the Monteverde Cloud Forest, it's no surprise that the lodge received a "Four Leaf" rating from Costa Rica's sustainable tourism certification program. The lodge owner, William Aspinall, former director of Monteverde, has instituted a new three-day hike through the rainforest to Monteverde. The lava flow at night no longer faces this side of the mountain, but you get to see daytime eruptions. Wheelchair accessible.

In Caño Negro

◆ Caño Negro Wildlife Refuge

In a remote area of the north lies the large, swampy, wildlife mecca, Caño Negro Wildlife Refuge. It's a long drive (124 km/77 miles north of Ciudad Quesada), but of huge interest for dedicated eco-travelers, naturalists and birders. A large lake covers much of the 9,969-hectare/24,623-acre park; most sightseeing is done by boat. Arrange your visit with La Fortuna agencies, listed on page 194. The best time to visit here is the rainy season – more water means more birds.

NICARAGUA SIDE TRIP

Just to the north of Caño Negro is Los Chiles, on the border of Nicaragua. If you're thinking of crossing the border, it may be possible to travel by boat from Los Chiles to San Carlos on Lake Nicaragua. Immigration is closed weekends. A much easier and safer way to get a Nicaraguan passport stamp is to go back south and take a boat trip to Tortuguero from Muelle, near Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí. The boat stops at a Nicaraguan customs and guardhouse and everyone must show ID. Costa Rica Expeditions *(☎ 506/2257-0766)* occasionally runs this route from Caño Negro. Call ahead.

◆ Lake Arenal

If you weren't impressed by – or couldn't see – the volcano, take a ride around Lake Arenal, Costa Rica's largest lake at 33 km/20 miles long. If nothing else, the size of the potholes in many parts of the road should impress (or depress, depending on your driving skills). The view of the countryside is wonderful.

Tectonic upheavals created Lake Arenal about three million years ago and it provided fresh fish for ancient Guatusu inhabitants of its shore. In 1973 an electrical energy dam raised the lake level and drowned the old villages of Arenal and Tronado. Arenal rebuilt on higher ground as Nuevo Arenal. The eastern edge of the lake has an incredible view of the volcano, although that side no longer features the lava flow.

As you drive west you pass dairy farms, secondary forests and the occasional habitation. The lake's water is warm and fine for swimming, but the most popular sports around are sailing, windsurfing and fishing for *guapote* (bass), who put up a fierce fight. Due to the lake's alignment and climate, it's famous for warm winds that whip across its western end – at 60 or more knots, especially from December to February. Outside of Tilarán you'll come to huge white windmills rotating with a steady hum on the hills above the lake. Be Don Quixote and chase windmills by turning up one of the dirt roads that rise to the huge metal dragons.

The first stop along the lake circuit should be Los Heroes *(☎ 506/2692-8012, www.pequenahelvecia.com, $$)*, a restaurant, gift-shop, hotel and dairy farm right out of *The Sound of Music*. The owners, a Swiss husband and Tica wife offer medium-size rooms in their huge Swiss cha-

Los Heroes

let. The rustic restaurant inside boasts a mixed menu of European and Tico cuisine. The unique attraction of Los Heroes is its two-mile-long narrow gauge railway (imported from Switzerland) that carries visitors over the river and through the woods (and tunnels) to a spaceship-like revolving restaurant called Rondorama. Quaint and popular wedding chapel on the hill.

Arenal Botanical Gardens, *(☎ 506-695-4273, www.exoticseeds.com)* was founded in 1991 by Michael LeMay as a "plant reserve and nature library." This lush, lovely hillside garden also contains a butterfly farm. Open 9-5 daily, admissions about US $8. Worth a peaceful and quiet visit, and they do mail-order exotic plant seeds.

A short distance from the botanical gardens is Villa Decary *(☎ 506/2694-4330, www.villadecary.com, $$$)*, another wonderful B&B, this one owned by North Americans. It has nice rooms and offers great birding.

Toad Hall *(☎ 506/2692-8020)*, a famous store that offers a great variety of local and national handicrafts, is located in the tiny town of La Unión. It has a pleasing vegetarian/health food restaurant overlooking the lake. For tasty pizza, head to Pizzeria and Restaurant Tramonti, which features an authentic wood-burning brick oven.

La Ceiba Tree Lodge *(☎ 506/2692-8050, www.ciebatree-lodge.com, $$)* is a captivating little lodge – not in a tree but up on a hillside with a sweeping view of the lake. A 500-year-old-plus ceiba tree is the inspiration for this wonderful B&B with five rooms and an apartment. Over 80 species of orchids are grown in the gardens surrounding the magnificent ceiba.

La Ceiba Tree Lodge

The quaint but rapidly growing town of Nuevo Arenal replaced the original town that was flooded in the late 1970s. *Achtung*! Not to be missed on the main drag is Ellen and Thomas' German bakery café, Tom's Pan *(☎ 506/2694-4547)*. They serve delicious daily baked goods, good coffee and rich German /Tico lunches. Try the strudel. Perched on a rise on the side of the road, Tom's is a must stop for

anyone passing through Nuevo Arenal. Tom also has a cabin available to rent. It's around back in the garden and features a sensual waterbed. Find diner-style gringo food at Restaurant/Bar Bambu, next to the gas station. At last, from here to Tilarán the road improves. Good eats can be found at Willy's Caballo Negro, three km/1.9 miles west, where vegetarian and European cooking are served side by side. If you follow the signs inland of Nuevo Arenal to Cote Lake you'll come to Lake Coter Eco-Lodge *(☎ 506/2289-6060, www.ecolodgecostarica.com, $$)*, an inviting little eco-adventure lodge with a canopy slide and environmental programs for ecotourists. The Rock River Lodge *(☎ 506/2692-1180, $$)* advertises the "Best Mountain Biking in Costa Rica." But we know it best for its popularity as a windsurfing outfitter. The restaurant-bar has a welcoming fireplace for cool or rainy evenings. The Mystica Resort, Bar & Pizza *(☎ 506/2692-1001, mystica@aol.com, $$)* never had Julia Roberts stay there (*Mystic Pizza*, her first movie... get it?) but does offer wood oven pizza in the restaurant. Their pretty ranch-style cabins have spacious rooms with porches entwined by flowers.

◆ Tilarán

The roundabout-the-lake route described above leads to Tilarán and from there, access to the western beaches of Nicoya and Guanacaste or to the famous Monteverde Cloud Forest. Tilarán is a cool country town at the center of farmlands and horse and cattle ranching. It's an unpretentious place that can serve as a base for trips to several destinations, with a comfortable climate and lots of activities. Eat at La Carreta Restaurant *(☎ 506/2695-6654)* behind the cathedral; you can't miss the signs. Billie and Tom Jaffe from Florida opened it in 1994 and their food is legendary. It has an unusual gift shop and a good menu. They have also opened an eight-room La Carreta Bed & Breakfast *(☎ 506/2695-6654)*, a good choice in the center of town. Alternatively, stay cheap at the Hotel Naralit, across from the modern-looking cathedral, and eat in the great little "soda" next door.

From Tilarán there is a back way to Monteverde or a good road to the Inter-American Highway, which can take you to Guanacaste or back to San José. The gravel road shortcut from Tilarán to Monteverde is bumpy and rough but passable with four-wheel-drive. A public bus follows the same route. If you go this way you'll pass El Trapiche, an old-fashioned sugar mill. Along this route (six

km/3.7 miles before Santa Elena) is another Cooprena lodge, Albergue Ecoverde *(☎ 506/2286-4203)* run by 12 families of Los Olivos. Fourteen kilometers outside town is Solania Country Villas (☎ *506/2494-0094, www.villas-solania.com, $$*) with six equipped cabins, tennis court, pool, and fun farm atmosphere.

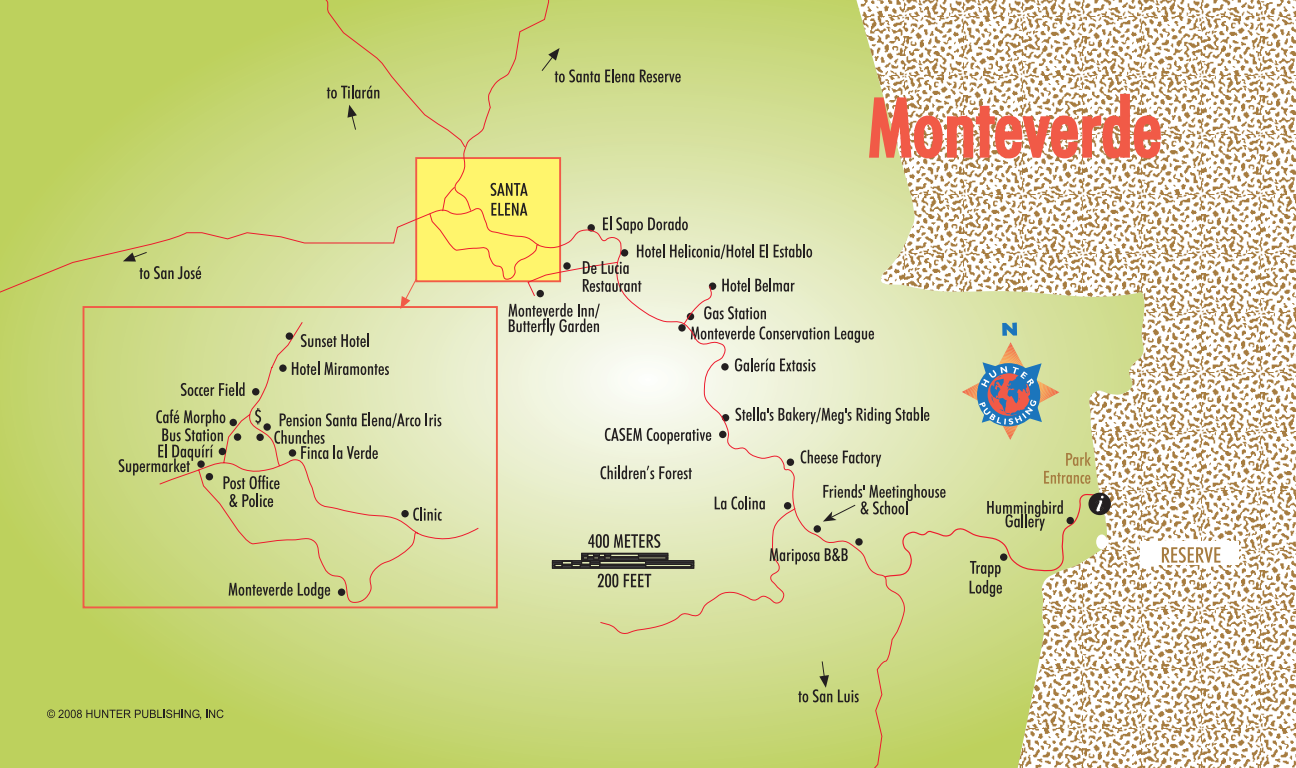
The road from Tilarán to the Inter-American Highway is a good one, and your choice once you reach it is to proceed north to Liberia and the coast, or drive south through Cañas and backtrack up to Monteverde.

Monteverde

◆ Monteverde Cloud Forest

A colony of Quaker farmers from Alabama, searching for a more pacifistic environment, came to Costa Rica in 1951 just two years after it abolished its army. They set up dairy farms in Monteverde ("Green Mountain"), part of the steep Tilarán mountain range. The community prospered when they developed a market for their excellent cheeses. Come here hungry – Productores de Monteverde Cheese Factory produces a ton of cheese a day.

In the Monteverde Cloud Forest



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Sloth in the Monteverde Cloud Forest (Desafio Adventure Company)

The original settlers included forward-thinking pioneers who recognized the frailty of the environment and determined to preserve the Guacimal River at its source in the primary cloud forests. By preventing development in their original 554-hectare/1,368-acre Bosque Eterno, the area remained pristine until the threat of homesteading in the surrounding forest forced further action. The Monteverde Biological Cloud Forest Preserve *(☎ 506/2253-3267, www.cct.or.cr)* became official in March, 1972. The foggy forest (elevation 1,440 meters/4,662 feet) boasts six distinct ecological zones. Since its inception, the preserved region (not a national park) has grown rapidly – both in size and fame – and now covers 10,500 hectares and sees well over 60,000 visitors annually. Entrance into the park is restricted to 150 people at any one time, which may mean a wait. About US $15.

The Monteverde Cloud Forest is a diverse biological wonderland that contains old-growth trees, favored habitat of the spectacular quetzal. But it is also home to 400 other kinds of birds, including 30 types of hummingbirds and such odd specimens as three-wattled bellbirds and bare-necked umbrella birds. Ground-dwelling residents include the powerful jaguar, the ocelot and the tapir, 2,500 species of plants (including 420 kinds of orchids) and 1,200 amphib-

Stargazer (Desafio Adventure Company)

ian and reptile species. Because there is so much to see, it's best to have a guide who knows where to look for wildlife in the wild. Guided tours run about US $15 per person and night tours, when it's not raining, start at 7 pm. You can reserve a guide on-line at guide@monteverdeinfo.com. An excellent website focusing on both Monteverde and the Santa Elena area is www.monteverdeinfo.com.

If you're driving the Inter-American Highway there are two routes up the mountain. Both feature hard driving on rough roads – a conscious effort by the Monteverde community to slow development by jarring your kidneys. The southern route from San José is just before the Río Lagarto Bridge at Km 149; look for a sign next to a bar to the right.

The northern route is better marked and leaves the highway at the turn for Las Juntas. It's a good road for a third of the way up the mountain, and then it deteriorates to be as bad as, if not worse than, the southern way. Follow the sign in Juntas for San Rafael, not Los Dos. Monteverde is two hours from the highway and about four hours from San José. If you have time, check out Las Juntas, once the gold-mining capital of Costa Rica. It has an Eco Museo outside town with trails leading to an old gold mine. Boston – yes Boston – is a nearby town with an active gold-mining cooperative that you can visit. Call Mina Tours *(☎ 506/2662-0753)* for an escorted tour.

As of press time, the controversy of improving the road up to Monteverde from the Inter-American Highway has renewed. The road's condition definitely restricts the number of tourists and extends the length of time they stay which, it can be argued, benefits the ecology. Four-wheel-drive vehicle is strongly recommended.

Adventures on Foot

No guides are needed for the Monteverde Cloud Forest trails, although we recommend you hire one to point out the wildlife. Use your hotel's recommendation or hire a private guide through Asociación de Guias Monteverde *(☎ 506/2645-5483)*.

Outside the reserve there is an excellent hike to the top of Cerro Amigos, along the dirt road to the Television Tower. The road begins just before the gas station on the road to Monteverde and passes the Hotel Bel Mar. It's about 3½ hours round-trip. On a clear day, you can see forever from the 1,842-meter/6,000-foot peak.

Bosque Nuboso de Los Niños

The Children's Eternal Rainforest is good for children of all ages – in more ways than one. Its 3½-km/2.2-mile Bajo del Tigre Trail (Jaguar Canyon) snakes along the Pacific slope in a transition zone between wet and cloud forests. Thirty tree species within its border have been identified as previously unknown and the area is rich in diverse wildlife. The forest is managed by the Monteverde Conservation League and it borders the Monteverde Preserve. What is most magical about these woods is the fact that it was inspired by a fourth-grade students' Children's Rainforest Campaign in Sweden in 1987. It is now the largest private preserve in Costa Rica at over 50,000 acres.

There are two small private complimentary ecological endeavors in the area. Finca Ecologica, an Ecological Farm *(☎ 506/2645-5363)* with a forest, waterfall and fields, is great for birding and has guided tours available. The Reserva Senduro Tranquillo *(Quiet Path Reserve, ☎ 506/2645-5010)* is a 200-acre reserve belonging to the Lowther family. It has excellent bi-lingual trail guides. Up the hill from the Cheese Factory.

(AnywhereCostaRica.com)

Santa Elena Rainforest Reserve

Much less visited, so in some ways more virginal, is the nearby Reserva Santa Elena, one of the first successful community-administered private reserves in

Costa Rica. More than 750 acres of rainforest land was permanently leased by Santa Elena High School seven km/4.4 miles from the town of the same name. Entrance fees go towards maintenance and benefit local schools. One of the highlights in the 12 km/7.5 miles of trails is an 11-meter/36-foot viewing platform above the rainforest canopy. A four-wheel-drive leaves from Pension Santa Elena and the Banco Nacional each morning and heads to the reserve. Make reservations for a ride and/or a guide by phoning ☎ 506/2645-5014. There's also a welcome center at the north end of town.

◆ Santa Elena Pueblo

There is no real town of Monteverde, but a charming little village called Santa Elena, six km/3.7 miles downhill. This is the center of most activity and it's where you'll go for provisions and socialization. It features shops, bus station, restaurants, supermarket, bars, post office with Internet access and even a very likeable bookstore/laundromat/coffee shop, Chunches *(☎ 506/2645-5147)*, owned by Jim Stanley and Wendy Rockwell. The bulletin board here is used extensively by the community and visitors.

Shopping

When not trekking around the woods, serious shoppers head for "Community of Artisans of Santa Elena and Monteverde" (CASEM, ☎ 506/2645-5190), a women's crafts cooperative. They also feature lots of one-of-a-kind T-shirts, clothing, local coffee, weavings, pottery and souvenirs. From a modest start with eight women in 1982, the co-op has grown to over 200 women and men.

The Monteverde Park Visitor's Center also has a well-stocked gift shop. The Cheese Factory shows how they make and sell cheese. Up the road is a Ceramics Studio and there is a Butterfly Garden near the Finca Ecológica.

Gift and art galleries abound. Check out the Hummingbird Gallery, up on the way to the park entrance, or Galería Extasis, also on the main road uphill. Weekly workshops in various art forms can be arranged for long-term visitors at the Studio of the Arts *(US ☎ 800/370-3331, CR ☎ 506/2645-5434, www.mvstudios.com)*, a cooperative of local artists.

Original Canopy Tour in Monteverde Park

Adventures

More active travelers should contact the Original Canopy Tour *(☎ 506/2226-6483, www.canopytour.co.cr)*, which claims to be the pioneers of canopy tours. Participants are strapped into a safety harness and proceed to zip along steel wires stretched between tall trees. The best part for us was climbing to a platform through a hollowed strangler fig lattice that had killed the tree it once wrapped around. This activity is great for kids from eight years old to 80. Prices start at US $45 for walk-ins.

Higher and longer thrills can be found at Sky Trek *(☎ 506/2645-5238, www.skytrek.co.cr)*, a complex of high suspension bridges, platforms and zip lines to shoot over and through the trees. You'll be as much as 127 meters/417 feet above the ground and travel 427 meters/1,400 feet on one of the runs. Of course, you're strapped into a safety harness. Its sister attraction, Sky Walk, offers a more sedate experience. Two km/1.25 miles of hiking trails lead to five long, narrow suspension bridges as much as 40 meters/132 feet above ground. All attractions are safe. Cost is about US $35 per person for the Trek and US $15 for the Walk.

An even more sedentary tour is with Natural Wonders Train *(☎ 506/2645-5960)*. It mimics the tram with cars suspended on rails traversing 1.5 km/.9 miles of open fields and woods. The slow-moving cars go as low as ground level and as high as 12 meters/39 feet. Near the Finca Ecológica.

Horseback riding is favorite pastime of both tourists and residents in Monteverde. Meg's Stables *(☎ 506/2645-5419)*, at Stella's Bakery, is the area's original horse haven and is very experienced.

Sabine's Smiling Horses *(☎ 506/2645-6894)* has happy equines as well as customers. Calm steeds are the specialty of El Palomino *(☎ 506/2645-5479)* and La Estrella *(☎ 506/2645-5075)*. Gitty yup.

Most hotels will make your day-before arrangements for the tours listed above.

Music lovers might like to coordinate their visit with the Monteverde Music Festival *(☎ 506/2645-5053, www.mvinstitute.org)*. It runs March through April at the Monteverde Institute and offers live performances nightly.

The main offices of Selvatura Park *(☎ 506/2645-5929, www.selvatura.com, restaurant),* a multi-recreational, eco-tourism park (with more interesting suspension bridges than SkyWalk's), are across the street from Santa Elena's Catholic Church. This private commercial park boasts canopy zip lines, treetop walkways, a reptile and amphibian exhibit and hummingbird and butterfly gardens. Also located here is the world's largest private insect collection, Jewels of the Rain Forest, whose worldwide specimens are presented in a way that can only be described as an "art form." The famous entomologist, Dr. Richard Whitten, who has collected insects since age five, presents this unusual and fascinating exhibition. *Ants in your pants?* If you're lucky he'll be there to expound on his passion – or play the pipe organ.

Jewels of the Rain Forest

All told, there are four canopy zip line tours, including Selvatura, in Monteverde. The least expensive is Aventura Canopy Tour *(☎ 506/2645-6959)*, which offers free transportation and features an exciting Tarzan Swing. The forest over which you travel is not as dense as at other zip rides, but thrill-seekers will love stepping off a two-story high platform and swinging 20 meters/66 feet over a ravine.

Places to Stay

All in all, we found Santa Elena a great place to hang out for several days or longer. There are some good hotels near town and in the area, plus more on the road uphill toward the forest. A bus leaves to

Monteverde Preserve from the Banco Nacional at 6:15 am and 1 pm daily, returning at noon and 4 pm. Only a couple of hotels are less than a half-hour walk uphill to the entrance.

HOTEL PRICE CHART	
Prices are per-night for two people, not including 16% tax	
$	$21-$40
$$	$41-$80
$$$	$81-$125
$$$$	$126-$200
$$$$$	over $200

IN TOWN

Hotel Finca Valverde *(250 meters/822 feet southeast of the Banco Nacional, ☎ 506/2645-5157, fax 2645-5216, www.monteverde.co.cr, 22 rooms in 14 cabañas and 8 standard rooms, restaurant, $$)*. Just on the outskirts of Santa Elena a working coffee plantation has sprouted a very pleasant hotel and bungalows. A metal bridge suspended over a rushing stream leads to the comfortable standard rooms housed in a large wooden building with wrap-around balcony and a good view. The individual cabañas, scattered along the wooded hillside, are more luxurious, incorporating a large bathroom, individual veranda with garden chairs, main bedroom and upstairs sleeping loft with queen-size beds. The hotel's candle-lit restaurant, Don Miguel, features excellent local cooking and generous servings, but reservations are requested for all three meals. Private enough to make it feel like the forest, but just a two-minute walk to the town and its community attractions.

Hotel Finca Valverde

Arco Iris *(behind the Pension Santa Elena, ☎ 506/2645-5067, fax 2645-5022, www.arcoirislodge.com, 10 rooms in 7 cabins, $$)*. The Arco Iris is German-owned and features attractive wood cabins on a tropically landscaped hill at the edge of town. The inviting duplex cabins are spread around the hillside set back off the road to Monteverde and the rooms in them are clean and basic. Well known as a pleasing place to stay. The larger family cabin has two bedrooms and a small sitting area with futon couches that can be con-

verted into beds. Our favorite is the Doll House, a charming miniature cabin with bunk beds, a little desk and a private bath. It's a real bargain. Full breakfast is an extra US $5 per person.

Pension Santa Elena *(☎ 506/2645-5051, fax 2645-6060, www.pensionsantaelena.com, $).* This bohemian low-rent lodge is the heart and soul of Santa Elena and if it ever changes it will doom the tiny town to gentrification. It has some private rooms with bath, and some shared rooms with shared bath. The people that run it are the town's Internet gurus. The pension is a landmark, with bulletin boards for communications to meet, arrange, rent, hire, bum, beg and borrow.

TOWARD THE CLOUD FOREST

Trapp Family Lodge

Trapp Family Lodge *(☎ 506/2645-5858, fax 2645-5990, www.trappfam.com, 10 rooms, restaurant, TV lounge, $$$)*. The young owner of this lodge is one of the warmest and friendliest hosts around – we really felt welcome here. Andrés Trapp Belmar grew up in Chile and came to Costa Rica to work as a guide in the rainforest. His grandmother was a Trapp from Austria, and hotels are in his blood – his uncle owns the Bavarian-like Belmar (see below). The rooms are clean and appealing, with lots of polished tropical hardwoods. Offers breakfast, lunch, and dinner at reasonable prices. This is the closest lodge to the Cloud Forest entrance, although it's still a fair hike.

In the Trapp Family Lodge

El Establo Hotel *(on the road to Monteverde in Cerro Plano, in US ☎ 727/565-1605, in CR 506/2645-5110, fax 2645-5033, www.hotelestablocr.com, 50 rooms, 2 restaurants, jacuzzi, cable TV lounge, fireplace lounge, pool, gym, full breakfast included, $$-$$$)*. We cannot do justice to this hotel by translating its name as "The Stable," nor by describing it

as built in a style that resembles a converted barn. But it has a very homey kind of American horse-loving appeal, accented by room doors that look as if they open top and bottom – Dutch or cottage doors – and high-ceilinged public areas instead of hallways. The unique country style is a reflection of the owner, Ruth Campbell, who came to Monteverde as one of the original Quaker settlers when she was a baby. Large windows around the hotel look out into the 61-hectare/150-acre gardens and fruit trees that attract many birds and butterflies. Spotlessly clean and comfortable, El Establo is simple and priced very reasonably for the excellent service provided. Family friendly atmosphere. No smoking and no alcohol served. Wheelchair accessible.

El Establo Hotel

Hotel Belmar *(on road to Monteverde, ☎ 506/2645-5201, fax 2645-5135, www.hotelbelmar.net, 34 rooms, jacuzzi, restaurant, $$$)*. If it were not for the warm temperature and surrounding cloud forest, you'd swear you were in the Alps. This well-known Swiss chalet-style hotel is built into the mountainside facing extravagant gardens that sweep downward to a small lake. The common areas have a rustic feel, but the individual rooms are well appointed, with two beds, dresser, natural wood walls and small balconies overlooking the grounds. The rather expensive restaurant, where dramatic sunsets can set the mood, is renowned for its international cooking.

Hotel Belmar

Hotel El Sapo Dorado (*on a side road not far uphill from the fork, ☎ 506/2645-5010, fax 2645-5180, www.sapodorado.com, restaurant, $$$).* The Sapo Dorado, or Golden Frog, is often sited as one of the best places to eat in Monteverde. It is – and it helps that the

Hotel El Sapo Dorado

owner, Hannah Lowther, is a gourmet chef and cookbook author. But it is also a luxury hotel that boasts beautiful suites with fireplaces, terraces with sweeping views and private cabins nestled in the woods. This is one of Monteverde's best.

NORTH OF SANTA ELENA

Swiss Hotel Miramontes *(500 meters/1,645 feet from the soccer field on the road from Las Juntas, ☎ 506/2645-5152, fax 2645-5297, www.swisshotelmiramontes.com, 8 rooms, restaurant, $$).* Set up on a sunny hill, the Miramontes is a small hotel run by a Swiss couple. Four standard rooms are off a hallway that leads to an appealing restaurant (open for lunch and dinner, international cuisine, including Swiss) and four rooms are in separate, wood chalets. By showing even a small interest in orchids or butterflies, you may encourage part-owner Walter Faisthuber to take you on a nature walk.

Swiss Hotel Miramontes

Sunset Hotel *(on the road to Skytrek and Santa Elena Forest, ☎ 506/2645-5048, www.monteverdeinfo.com, 7 rooms, restaurant, full breakfast, $-$$).* The squeaky-clean Sunset offers motel-like rooms, all with a great view of the sunsets over the Nicoya Peninsula – if the clouds don't get in the way. It's an excellent value in Monteverde, set on a knoll with expansive open gardens and nature hiking trails. The restaurant, open for breakfast and dinner, fea-

Sunset Hotel

tures German/European cooking. Mucho birds and butterflies. Clean, comfortable, and inexpensive B&B's abound, especially in the area north of Santa Elena; look for Los Cipreces B&B, Quetzal Inn, Cabañas La Pradera, or Las Orquideas.

Places to Eat

DINING PRICE CHART	
Prices based on a typical entrée, per person, not including beverage.	
$	under $5
$$	$5 to $10
$$$	$11-$20
$$$$	over $20

Just when you think you'll never survive another creep-along, crawl-along bumpy road, a short way down this one provides a respite at Restaurante De Lucía *(on the road to the Butterfly Gardens, Cerro Plano, ☎ 506/2645-5337, $-$$)*. We didn't even see a sign at the intersection (where the Hotel Heliconia and El Establo are) for this surprisingly good eatery featuring international cuisine and excellent wines. Owner Lucia and her husband José (who was once a lawyer in Chile – so don't get him started about Pinochet) have built a lovely all-wood restaurant with a European ambience, not to mention a paved parking lot. Open from 11 am for lunch and dinner. Prices are reasonable and the food commendable.

Don't miss Stella's Bakery *(☎ 506/2645-5560)*, across from CASEM store – just follow the scent of home baking and Monteverde coffee. Stella's is a hip little coffee shop, bakery and sandwich shop with eclectic artwork and earth mothers in attendance. A Monteverde institution.

Most hotels have good restaurants, and you don't need to be staying there to dine. A higher-class entry is the one in the Sapo Dorado Hotel, which receives the cuisine kudos from us. In town, look into Café Maravilla, across from the bus station. This is by far the most popular place in town

Restaurant in the Sapo Dorado

and they've recently expanded. You'll get a good economical meal – veggies and *batidos* are big – and a chance to see fellow wanderers. Next to the church, Kiosco de la Iglesia offers *casados* cooked by the ladies of the congregation. Coffee up and hunker down at Chunches, a bookstore, restaurant, everything store on the side street across from Pension Santa Elenan, or munch Middle Eastern upstairs at Boemio's, near the church. Serving seafood and pasta, The Tree House is built around an old fig tree. El Bambalu has occasional live music in their restaurant, but on the road to Cerro Plano, Moon Shiva shivers with dance lessons, hookahs, and Mexican food.

Liberia & Guanacaste

◆ Liberia

Liberia

The capital of Guanacaste Province is the growing city of Liberia, now complete with an popular international airport. Overlooked as a tourist destination in itself, the dusty colonial town is a center for the many ranches and farms in the mostly agricultural area. The sun shines more in Guanacaste especially in the dry season, but even in the rainy season when things are green, you get more sun time. The year-round weather down on the plains is hotter, but the town offers some respite in its cool, shady central square and *mercado*. Liberia is a more colonial town than any we've mentioned before. Spanish architecture survives in corner homes that have *puertas del sol* (wooden doors on each side of the corner, one to let in the morning sun, one for the afternoon) and streets lined with flamboyane trees. These elements combine to make a pleasant stroll in the early morning or late afternoon. A good area is Calle Central (or Calle Reál), from the cathedral south, a street lined with historic, colonial-era buildings.

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QUARTZ SHINE

The sparkles in the walls of older buildings are from quartzite in the white coral limestone used to build most of the original Ciudad Blanca, the White City.

Stop at the Casa de la Cultura, three blocks south of the main plaza, which features a display (Spanish) of the area's cowboy, *sabanero*, heritage. The Iglesia de la Ermita de la Resurreccíon (Church of the Hermit of the Resurrection) is thankfully shortened by locals to La Agonía, The Agony. The simple, quiet, colonial-style church dates back to when this corner of Costa Rica succeeded from Nicaragua. Liberia holds a major festival on July 25 to commemorate this event. Count on cowboys, rodeos, parades, processions, fireworks, concerts and bloodless bullfights.

Set along the Inter-American Highway, Liberia is the last large city before Nicaragua, 75 km/47 miles north.

Places to Stay & Eat

If you're staying, several hotels and services cluster around the busy highway intersection where you turn for Nicoya and the international airport. You'll know you're there by the big Burger King on the corner. There are two Best Western hotels in Liberia: Best Western Las Espuelas *(US ☎ 800/780-7234, CR ☎ 506/2666-0144, www.bestwestern.co.cr, $$)* is south of the main intersection and traffic light; and Best Western El Sitio (*US ☎ 800/780-7234, CR ☎ 506/2666-1211, www.bestwestern.co.cr, $$)* is west of the main intersection and light, toward the airport. Both are commendable hotels with big pools, air conditioning, restaurants, cable and secure parking. Farther along the road past the airport is the wonderful Café Europa & German Bakery *(☎ 506/2666-1081)*, famous for sweet treats, lunches and German baked specialties. You'll encounter German Bakery goods sold or served in various hotels and restaurants on the shore. Big souvenir stores are nearby.

In Liberia's town, around the main park square, one of the most serviceable motels is Hotel La Siesta *(Calle 4, Av 4 & 6, ☎ 506/2666-0678, lasiestaliberia@hotmail.com, pool, restaurant, air, cable, $)*, with an inviting blue pool that nudges up to the porch of its rooms. A block away on Calle 4 is La Cocina de José, one of the few upscale eateries in town. It serves typical local food. The inexpensive Posada del Tope *(Calle Central between Av 2 & 4, ☎ 506/2666-3876)* offers small rooms with shared baths in a restored colo-

nial home. They manage the hotel across the street, Casa Real, which boasts an astronomical observatory up top. Our favorite place to eat breakfast in town is the venerable patio restaurant Jardín de Azucar (Sugar Garden) near the Central Park. We also like the seafood Restaurant Paso Real on the corner facing the park on the south side with a balcony. East of the park and south on Calle 8 is an intriguing new place, Restaurant El Café, which serves light French food, cheeses and better wines in air-conditioned comfort. Right now, it's open only Monday through Friday until 7 pm.

Just 200 meters/660 feet north of the highway intersection, as you head toward Nicaragua and Rincon de la Vieja Park, look left for basic Hotel Aserradero *(☎ 506/2666-1939, abalto@rasca.co.cr, $)* in a converted lumber mill, and Jardín Cervecero La Jarra, a chic new seafood restaurant that also serves chocolate fondue! Melts in your mouth and in your hand.

National Parks

◆ Palo Verde National Park

Nestled down in the Tempisque River Valley is one of the most important bird paradises in Costa Rica, the Palo Verde National Park *(☎ 506/2671-1062, www.ots.ac.cr)*. The park is used by the Organization for Tropical Studies to investigate its unique dry-forest ecosystem. Cattle still graze in many parts and help keep down the vegetation, reflecting a symbiotic relationship with the birds that have come to seek refuge. Plus, cattle businesses benefit the local economy.

Linnaeus butterfly (MammaGeek)

To get to Palo Verde National Park, follow the signs one hour west from Bagaces, a small town halfway between Cañas and Liberia on the Inter-American Highway.

Turquoise-browed motmot

Birding

The best time to see birds is during the dry season when they congregate around the water holes very near the ranger station. Scarlet macaws are the big attraction here, even for non-birders. The administration will refer you to local boatmen who will provide transportation over to Isla Pájaros, an important nesting ground. Arrange in advance. Observation of "Bird Island" is from the boat only. NOTE: Do not scare up a flock for photos – it disturbs their nesting cycle and can result in a fine for you.

Places to Stay & Eat

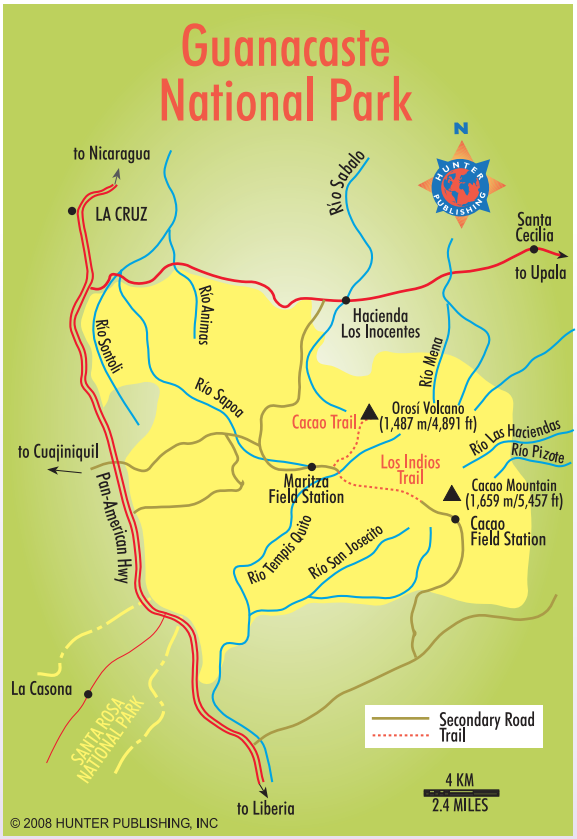
Close to Palo Verde, try the new luxury B&B, Rancho Humo *(☎ 506/2255-2463, $$$)*, located near Puerto Humo on the west bank of the Tempisque River. Reservations required.

◆ Lomas Barbudal

The Reserva Agroecologica de San Ramón is more commonly known as Lomas Barbudal, or Bearded Hills. It's just 15 km/9.3 miles southwest of Bagaces – look for a dirt road just north of Bagaces and follow it for six km/3.7 miles. Open only in the dry season, this bird and animal refuge also boasts a diverse plant life, including rare cannonball trees (*balas de canón*), upon whose pendulous fruit scarlet macaws come from Palo Verde to dine. Camping is permitted, but the park has only rudimentary facilities. Swimming and hiking. You can get a taxi from Bagaces. Admission, US $25.

◆ Guanacaste National Park

The park that bears the name of the Province is a sizeable 32,500 hectares/80,275 miles of land reserved to protect animals and their migrations through the grasslands at the foot of the Orosí and Cacao volcanoes. Many rare and endangered species crisscross the park as part of their migratory routes and still others live in the area and depend upon a protected ecosystem for their survival. In the new ecological thinking, habitats – rather than individual species – are protected. This has the added benefit of helping multiple spe-



Howler monkey (edelmar)

cies. In the case of Guanacaste, naturalists are attempting to reclaim the original unique "dry forest" that once covered this corner of Costa Rica and the Pacific lowlands as far north as Mexico. Biologists have created a very successful program that trains local *campesinos* in identification of species, conservation and fire prevention – brush fires are the bane of reforestation efforts. Because it was set aside to directly benefit animals, very little in the way of facilities are available for the public. However, you can arrange a tour of the intricate, rock petroglyphs dating back to around 500 A.D. The park is part of Area de Conservación Guanacaste, and you can contact their headquarters for information, ☎ *506/2666-5051, www.acguanacaste.ac.cr.*

◆ Rincón de la Vieja National Park

Rincón de la Vieja National Park is an impressive park surrounding two volcanoes, 25 km/15.5 miles northeast of Liberia. The park's 14,090 hectares/34,802 acres have been split into two sections, Las Pailas and Santa Maria. Las Pailas (The Cauldrons) includes the active volcano, Rincón de la Vieja (Old Woman's Place), complete with fumaroles, mud pots and steam vents, plus a number of waterfalls.

The park is part of Area de Conservación Guanacaste, and you can contact their headquarters for information, ☎ *506/2666-5051, www.acguanacaste.ac.cr.* Admission is US $6 per day.

Contribute to the ecology and local economy by booking and planning your visit through the local micro-business Chamber of Commerce association with the acronym, ACATURIVIE (☎ *506/2691-8177, www.acaturivie.com*). The organization helps tourists and benefits women's cooperatives in the area's small towns. Headquartered in Curubanda Lodge and Finca Nueva Zelandia.

Rincón de la Vieja National Park (Tim Ross)

OLD WOMAN'S PLACE

The volcano's name comes from a Romeo and Juliet native legend about Princess Curubanda, whose lover from a feuding tribe, Prince Mixcoac, was thrown into the volcano. In order to be near him, she moved to the mountaintop and became a great healer, bestowing healing qualities to the ash and mud from the volcanic mud pots.

Rincón is a massive 600,000-year-old geological wonder with at least nine volcanic cones. The rim of the most active crater is 1,806 meters/5,940 feet high with near-vertical sides denuded of vegetation. No less than 32 rivers flow down the mighty volcano that bridges the Continental Divide, and its activity once served as a lighthouse for ships at sea. The most recent eruption of conse-

quence was 1997 when it caused problems for some small towns on the Atlantic side.

Rincón's diverse ecosystems offer a variety of flora. Its high forested slopes feature gnarled, dwarfed trees draped in moss mats that provide the arboreal base for orchids and epiphytes. It hosts a large population of Costa Rica's national flower, the guaria morada orchid, and in the center of the brushwood is an immense 800-year-old ceiba tree – the start of one of several canopy tours. Rincón de la Vieja is home to 300 bird species, including crested guan, blue-crowned motmot and emerald toucanet, as well as a variety of mammals such as collared peccaries, agoutis, nine-banded armadillos and several species of monkeys. Many more people would visit here if access were a little easier, but the roads are often as bad as those at Monteverde.

Places to Stay

Hacienda Lodge Guachipelin *(☎ 506/2666-8075, www.guachipelin.com, $$-$$$ with meals)*. You might stay here and take their tours to the hot springs and other natural wonders. (If this is your first time, tours with any of the hotels are more rewarding than wandering on your own.) The Guachipelin accommodations are comfortable, with a lovely spring-filled pool. It's set amid a working 19th century-era cattle ranch. Their exciting adventure tour offerings involve hikes, climbs, traverses and rappelling down a waterfall in a lush canyon of Río Colorado. There's river swimming and diving, too.

HOTEL PRICE CHART	
Prices are per-night for two people, not including 16% tax	
$	$21-$40
$$	$41-$80
$$$	$81-$125
$$$$	$126-$200
$$$$$	over $200

Hacienda Lodge Guachipelin

Rincon de la Vieja Mountain Lodge *(☎ 506/2200-0238, www.rincondelaviejalodge.net, $$)* is rustic but comfortable farm lodge close to the park entrance. Despite its being called a *posada*, the Posada El Encuentro *(☎ 506/8843-0616, www.posadaencu.com, pool, $$ with breakfast)* is an excellent B&B in a former private home en route to the park. One of the "Charming Nature Hotels."

Hotel Borinquen

Hotel Borinquen *(☎ 506/2666-5098, fax 2666-2931, www.borinquenresort.com, pool, $$$-$$$$)* is a luxurious and private mountain resort and thermal spa within range of the volcano's warm underground springs. Drive 12 km north of Liberia, turn right through Cañas Dulce, left in Porton Principal, and continue to the main gate, about another 3.5 km/. In the middle of nowhere, guests are indulged in spacious luxury cabin suites with satellite TV, air conditioning and other amenities, such as spa beauty treatments, hiking, horseback riding, ATV rides, mud baths and swimming.

◆ Santa Rosa National Park

Divided from Guanacaste National Park by the Inter-American Highway, Santa Rosa National Park *(www.acguanacaste.ac.cr)* was Costa Rica's first official park. In the quixotic world of environmental protection, the government created Santa Rosa to protect a battlefield – but wound up benefitting a multitude of microhabitats, including dry deciduous forests, mangrove swamps, oak forests, evergreen forests, dry savannahs and turtle nesting beaches.

WILLIAM WALKER'S BATTLE

This fateful battle occurred in late March, 1856, when William Walker, an American *conquistador*, invaded Costa Rica after taking Nicaragua with a mercenary force called the Filibusters. He made the Hacienda Santa Rosa (Museo La Casona) his headquarters and it became the scene of the battle between a hastily assembled Tico force and Walker's mercenaries. National hero, Juan Santamaria, a drummer boy from Alajuela, turned the tide by supposedly setting on fire the roof of La Casona, forcing Walker's command out into the bush.

The landscape in Santa Rosa is similar to the African plains – high temperature and a long dry season that browns everything. The park is managed in two sections, Santa Rosa to the south and Murciélago along the north coast of the peninsula that the park encompasses. It was recently expanded with a huge cattle ranch, complete with an airstrip used in the Iran-Contra affair by the infamous Colonel Oliver North. Very close to La Casona (recently rebuilt after a fire) are camping facilities and a hiking trail, El Sendero Indio Desnudo (Naked Indian Path). But most people come to this park for the beaches, especially surfers and windsurfers. A rutted road leads down to the long bright-white beach of Playa Naranjo (camping but no drinking water) and the most famous surfing break around, Witch's Rock. Access to Playa Nancite is restricted because of its importance as a turtle nesting ground.

Beaches in the Murciélago sector can be accessed from the fishing village of Cuajiniquil. North, along the ocean from here is an annex to the park, Bahía Junquillal Wildlife Refuge, which has a good swimming beach and camping. Remember – because it will affect your enjoyment – this entire area is buffeted by strong, warm, westerly winds in the dry season. Two entrances on the Inter-American Highway access the park. The next town north is La Cruz, 20 km/12.4 miles south of the Peñas Blancas border crossing (the border station is open 8 am-6 pm).

Los Inocentes Lodge

A Place to Stay

Fourteen km/8.7 miles from La Cruz near the Nicaraguan border is the famous Los Inocentes Lodge *(☎ 506/2679-9190, www.losino*

centeslodge.com, $$$, meals included), a working hacienda that's more than a century old. This was one of the first eco-lodges open for guests in Costa Rica. It borders Guanacaste National Park and has a fabulous view of the Orosí Volcano. Rooms are in the main lodge or in very spacious separate cabins. The food and service are excellent and the ranch exudes old-fashioned charm. Day visitors can eat and horseback ride. Take a drive up, but only in an SUV.

Nicoya Peninsula
to Playas Grande, Tamarindo, Flamingo & Hermosa
Playa Negra
Paraíso
Playa Junquillal
Lagarto
Santa Cruz
San Juanillo
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Playa Norosa
Nosara
Miramar
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BARRA HONDA NATIONAL PARK
160
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Golfo de Nicoya
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Santa Teresa
Cobano
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Puntarenas
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Montezuma
Playa Tambor
Paquera
CABO BLANCO ABSOLUTE NATURE RESERVE
NOT TO SCALE
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Nicoya Peninsula

If Guanacaste Province is the shoulder of Costa Rica as you look at a map, the Nicoya Peninsula is its right arm. The big attraction here are the sandy beaches, which stretch from the end of the Santa Rosa Park down to Cabo Blanco Nature Reserve on the tip of the peninsula and around to Curú. The area is dry and hot, and gets much more sun than any other part of the country, making it alluring for sun and sand lovers.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Northern Peninsula 233 (Playas Hermosa, Flamingo, Tamarindo, Grande, Junquillal)
- Central Peninsula 254 (Santa Cruz & Nicoya, Playa Sámara, Playa Nosara)
- Southern Peninsula 264 (Playa Naranjo, Playa Tambor, Montezuma, Cabo Blanco Reserve, Malpais, Santa Teresa)

Costa Rica's beaches are not as visually appealing as Mexico's Yucatán coast or the islands of the Caribbean. But that's not to say its beaches aren't beautiful in their own right – plus, they attract ecotourists because of the many turtle nesting sites and empty beaches in a natural, unspoiled state. Did we mention, "surf's up?"

Sand colors run from black or gray to brown, from gold to white, depending on its origin. Darker sand is volcanic. Some beaches are easily accessible and crowded, others hidden and magical, and still others accessible only by sea and completely deserted. A vacation to Nicoya, or as a stop in your travels, is a wonderful experience.

To reach the beaches of northern Nicoya from Liberia, simply head west to Guardia or Comunidad and follow signs for your destination. This road goes south to Santa Cruz, the town of Nicoya and farther. You can take it all the way to Montezuma. From the Central Valley, cross the Río Tempisque on the bridge or take a ferry from Puntarenas to Playa Naranjo (not to be confused with other places with the same name in Costa Rica) or to Paquera.

Northern Peninsula

A direct road from Liberia through Comunidad leads to the northernmost set of beaches to Playas Panama, Hermosa, Playa del

Coco and Ocotal. The road from Belén eventually forks to two other groups of beaches. The right fork takes you to Playas Pan de Azúcar, Potrero, Flamingo, Brasilito and Conchal. The left fork leads to Playas Grande, Tamarindo and Junquillal. *As in all Costa Rica these days, watch your valuables*!

◆ Playa Hermosa Area

Playa Hermosa

Playa Hermosa, or Beautiful Beach, has developed in the last few years, so-far with without mega-hotels. The beaches of this grey-sand horseshoe bay are wide and expansive, the water warm and inviting. If you're thinking of going under the waves, you're in luck. Diving Safaris (*formerly Bill Beard's, ☎ 506/2672-0012, www.costaricadiving.com*) is located here. It's one of the area's oldest and largest operators.

Villa del Sueño

PLACES TO STAY & EAT

Make the first left after your turn toward the beach and you'll encounter Villa del Sueño (*☎ 506/2672-0026, www.villadelsueno.com, air, pool, restaurant, $$*), one of the more appealing places to stay set just a short walk from the beach un-

der shade trees on the dirt road. Rooms are clean and simple. There's a small pool, large restaurant, expansive gardens and condos across the street that they also rent.

A good choice if you want an equipped kitchen is Villa Huetares *(on the second beach turn, ☎ 506/2672-0052, pool, basketball court, air, $$$)*. These large motel suites with kitchenettes can sleep four or more. Super value in the off-season – and you're only a block or so from the beach. Right across the street are two new indulgent hotels, the Hotel Resort Villa Acacia *(☎ 506/2672-1000, www.villaacacia.com, $$$)*, which features luxury rooms and villas and a great pool, and Hotel Mangaby *(☎ 506/2672-0048, www.hotelmangaby.com, $$-$$$),* a handicap-accessible hotel that features large, clean rooms, a big pool with waterfall and a jacuzzi.

Our on-the-beach favorite is El Velero Hotel *(☎ 506/2672-0036, www.costaricahotel.net, restaurant, pool, $$)*. The bar is a happening place in the evening and the restaurant back in the shade near the beach is very pleasing for three meals. Rooms are simply furnished, but comfortable. The hotel offers a very popular sailing day-trip on their 38-foot catamaran.

At El Velero Hotel

More monkeying around at night is at the popular local watering hole, Monkey Bar, set back from the road so it doesn't share the fun with neighbors, on the road to Playa Panama. Farther along from the Monkey Bar's island atmosphere is Gingers, a trendy restaurant-bar that serves drinks and Nuevo Cuisine appetizers at open-air tables under a winged roof, high on a deck above the road. If it's too hot, they offer air conditioning, while overhead fans cool the tables outside. Playa Panama, just north of Hermosa, is the location of resorts that are part of the planned Cancún-like mega-resort development known as Papagayo. Expensive and expansive.

Playa del Coco

Playa del Cocos, south of Hermosa, is a popular destination for Costa Ricans and tourists alike. It has a paved road going right up to the beach, which allows easy access. Weekends are generally

boisterous and loud downtown – head here if you're looking for something to do. The beach itself has a dull volcanic gray sand (for white sand, sneak down to Ocotal). Cocos isn't a surfer beach, but it is a port, which makes it very popular with divers and fishermen, who ship out from its anchorages, and surfers bound for Witch's Rock. Mid-July sees a very big celebration – the Virgin del Mar Festival. In fact, Cocos has a reputation as a fun, year-round party town with good restaurants and shopping, which makes it the number one destination of the northern beaches. Divers will want to connect with Rich Coast Diving *(☎ 506/2670-0176, www.richcoastdiving.com)* for some of the country's best dives. Rich Coast was one of the first dive operators in the area and is very experienced. Sports fishermen can catch Arco Pacífico Sportfishing *(☎ 506/2670-0707)*.

PLACES TO STAY & EAT

As for Coco lodgings, Rancho Armadillo *(☎ 506/2670-0108, www.ranchoarmadillo.com, $$$)* stands out as a comfortable luxury hotel in the foothills above the beach. The small pool has a stunning ocean view and a covered deck to view incredible sunsets, watch for birds or to star gaze at night. The spacious rooms are wood paneled and the gardens are manicured. Turn left just before the road into town becomes a divided boulevard; follow the driveway lined by bougainvilleas, uphill.

HOTEL PRICE CHART	
Prices are per-night for two people, not including 16% tax	
$	$21-$40
$$	$41-$80
$$$	$81-$125
$$$$	$126-$200
$$$$$	over $200

Closer to downtown, El Pato Loco Inn *(☎ 506/2670-0145, www.costa-rica-beach-hotel-patoloco.com, $$)* offers clean, very pleasing rooms around back of their delicious Italian restaurant. The friendly owners traded in the hills of the ancient city of Romulus and Remus for the mountains and natural wonders of Costa Rica. Very appealing place. Nearby is the new supermarket, where everyone shops, sooner or later. It boasts a well-used bulletin board and sells local newspapers.

The big boy on the block is Hotel & Casino Coco Verde *(☎ 506/2670-0494, fax 2670-0555, pool, air, restaurant, cable, spa, casino, $$-$$$)*. This 33-room former Best Western property sits in the mid-

dle of all the action, just a long block from the waterfront. It offers large rooms and all the comforts of home. A safe bet. Another choice is Hotel Villa Flores B&B *(☎ 506/2670-0269, www.hotel-villa-flores.com, air, $$),* located on the sharp right turn just past Coco Verde. It has very large rooms, a swimming pool and pretty gardens. The high season restaurant, for which you should make reservations, features gourmet continental cooking. Almost opposite is B&B Laura's House *(☎ 506/2670-0751, www.laurashousecr.net*), a simple but funky guest house with a tiny pool.

Hotel & Casino Coco Verde

A right turn on the side road here leads to the town's more elegant hotel entry, Hotel La Puerta del Sol *(☎ 506/2670-0195, hotelsol@racsa.co.cr, air, cable, phone, $$-$$$).* The "Doorway to the Sun" hotel features a gym, jacuzzi and pleasing tropical gardens, plus inviting junior suites for longer stays. Its *al fresco* restaurant, Sol y Luna, is renowned for fine Italian food and is worth the difficulty to find in the evening.

There is an ever-growing number of dining choices as Cocos increases in popularity. The two high-quality restaurants mentioned above, in Sol y Luna and Villa Flores hotels, are more quiet and upscale than ones on the main drag, but those are a lot more fun to people watch. Try Papagayo's Seafood, famous for you know what, or, for a special treat, eat at Bob's Louisiana Bar & Grill, upstairs on a modern veranda. We had an excellent dinner, but chuckled over our choice of humus as an appetizer; they served us peanut butter. Still, we like Cajun food and Bob cooks up a good meal. On the beach and best to visit when there's a sea breeze is Papagayo Pura Vida, a seafood restaurant.

Night owls can head along the beach to Disco Coco Mar for dancing, dining and drinking until the wee hours.

Playa Ocotal

Playa Ocotal is the southernmost beach in this bay. Its gentle cove is home to sailing yachts at anchor and steep hills that come right to the water at each end of the bay. For tranquility, scenery, black sand and swaying trees this was our favorite.

El Ocotal

The El Ocotal Beach Resort and Marina *(☎ 506/2670-0321, fax 2670-0083, www.ocotalresort.com, $$$$$)* is a lovely hotel with rooms, bungalows and suites set up on a rocky bluff above the gentle bay. Fabulous views and a very good restaurant, with a large veranda for *al fresco* dining. Two pools and a lovely beach. They also operate a casual beachside restaurant that we found worthwhile, Father Roosters Bar & Grill. With wooden plank floors, billiards and foot-tapping music from a stereo, this bar and restaurant is fun to eat in or to hang out and drink. Try the Tequila Matar, a tequila to die for.

Breakfast area at Casa Blanca

Speaking of heaven, Hotel Villa Casa Blanca *(☎ 506/2670-0518, fax 2670-0448, www.villablanca.com, pool, restaurant, jacuzzi*) is about as close as you can get without being on the beach itself. This sumptuous Spanish-styled mansion sits amid a lovely garden on a bluff overlooking the ocean and the surrounding, steep rolling hills. The intimate rooms are decorated with formal heavy furniture

and fabulous artwork. Lately, it's become a favorite for weddings and small groups looking for a unique hotel experience. *Muy romantico!*

◆ Playa Flamingo Area Beaches

Playa Flamingo

Beaches surround Playa Flamingo, long considered Costa Rica's premier resort area. Located on a peninsula, Flamingo's sand is pure white, as its pre-development name, "Playa Blanca," suggests. To get to the Flamingo area beaches from Playa Cocos, go back inland through Filadelfia and follow the signs for Flamingo. Or, if you have a four-wheel-drive, it's dry season, and you have good shock absorbers, follow the "Monkey Trail," 16 km/10 miles of rough road from the outskirts of Cocos to Playa Potrero. You'll pass near the Congo Trail Canopy Tour *(☎ 506/2666-4422, seven km/4 miles along the road)* and the Jardín Botánico 4 Mangos *(☎ 506/2670-0851*) along the way. Look for signs.

Playa Flamingo is fully developed with exclusive hotels and is no destination for budding naturalists – or low-budget beach bums. But the yachting crowd loves its protected harbor and marina.

Playa Potrero is north of Flamingo. Its sand is not as appealing, but it is a favorite for private homes and vacation getaways of retired North Americans.

Farther north is Playa Pan de Azucar (Sugar Bread Beach), which relatively undeveloped and has just one resort (see below).

Playa Brasilito is the south side of the jutting peninsula of Flamingo. It features a dull gray sand and gentle surf for good swimming. Like Potrero, it is a quiet little town. The next beach south is Playa Conchal. Until a few years ago, Conchal was a Tico-secret beach without hotels, just camping spots. Now Meliá resorts have an exclusive all-inclusive there.

Places to Stay & Eat

At Playa Flamingo, gringo vacationers stay at the Flamingo Marina Resort *(☎ 506/2654-4141, www.flamingomarina.com, $$$-$$$$)*, a quality resort hotel on a hill above the beach. Pools, views, restaurants, tennis – everything you expect. Lower down the hill, with a lower price scale too, mates can walk the plank to Mariner's Inn *(☎ 506/2654-4081)*, which features small, clean, air-conditioned rooms and a seafood restaurant.

Flamingo Marina Resort

Outside town, high on a bluff overlooking the harbor, you passed Hotel Colores del Pacífico *(☎ 506/2654-4769, fax 2654-4976, www.coloresdelpacifico.com, infinity pool, air, breakfast included)*. This stately hotel features upscale rooms with private terraces and plenty of activities for guests. Closed in the rainy season, September and October.

Hotel Colores del Pacifico

The best dining in Flamingo is at the popular Marie's Restaurant, near the Mariner's Inn. It serves delicious fresh fish and Mexican specials. Nearby is the Hillside Bistro, offering excellent and affordable sandwiches. Back at the top of the hill, Ambere's offers food, casino and dancing. Toward Brasilito Beach, Restaurant Les Arcades is a Belgian bistro with an inviting garden patio.

Bahia del Sol

In Playa Potrero live like Europeans on good food and fine wine at Bahia del Sol *(US ☎ 866/223-2463, CR 506/2654-4671, www.potrerobay.com, 28 rooms and suites in a 4-star resort, restaurant, Internet access, $$$$)* The beachside hotel has a lovely large pool next to its dining area and first-class accommodations. Follow your nose across the street to Harden's Bakery Garden, a bakery-snack bar as famous as Amos for chocolate chip cookies and cinnamon sticky buns. On the beach, Bar La Perla serves burgers and Bar/Restaurant Las Brisas features Tex-Mex and salads. In what passes for Potrero's downtown, there are many good little restaurants and sodas. Try them all and let us know.

Hotel Sugar Beach

Playa Pan de Azucar offers the sweet Hotel Sugar Beach *(☎ 506/2654-4242, www.sugarbeach.com, $$-$$$)*. We found this beach intriguing, with its rocky snorkeling in some spots and sandy areas otherwise. Wooded forest in back, infinity pool in front, and a torturous road that leads to it. You can stay in Playa Brasilito at the brand new Conchal Hotel *(☎ 506/2654-9125, $$$)*, where they host and serve with a French flair. The budget village hotel is the funky Caribbean-style wooden Hotel Brasilito *(☎ 506/2654-4247, www.brasilito.com*). Or stop at the memorable Restaurant Camarónes Dorado *(☎ 506/2654-4028*), with beach table service of mouth-watering seafood. They're so popular they run a shuttle to Flamingo to pick up the *hoi polloi*. We found our culi-

nary contentment at the corner of the soccer field and the beach at American-owned restaurant/bar Happy Snapper. It has excellent seafood and good prices. Nighttime dancing and loud music attract locals and tourists in droves. There is a gas station just outside town on the way to Flamingo. If your looking to snorkel, fish or just go for a boat ride in his 24-foot launch, ask in town for Eugenio "Chino" Amey, or phone him at ☎ *506/2654-4907*.

Playa Conchal is home to two resorts, Meliá Playa Conchal and Paradisus Playa Conchal Beach and Golf Resort. Play tennis, 18 holes of golf, or swim in what is purported to be Central America's largest swimming pool (excluding the ocean, of course).

Eight kilometers south of Conchal is Playa Real, accessed only by another very rough road. Two bungalow-style resorts there are Condor Lodge *(☎ 506/2654-4050*) and Hotel Bahía de los Piratas *(☎ 506/2290-4243, www.bahiade lospiratas.com*). Fully equipped two- and three-bedroom villas.

◆ Playa Tamarindo

Partly because of paved roads that lead almost all the way there (plus a local air strip, with service from San José) and partly because of its word-of-mouth among surfers, Tamarindo is one of the most popular beach destinations on Nicoya. The main drag of this dusty town is home to restaurants and artsy-crafty gift stores. At the end of the downtown road, where restaurants and the beach square a circle, street vendors sell jewelry and art in a tiny park.

The express bus ride from San José, which arrives in Tamarindo in the evening, takes you out of the valley and over dramatic mountains down to the dusty rolling plains of Guanacaste and the Nicoya cattle country. But no one seems to mind the windy weather when the surf is up in the warm Pacific. Surfing season at Tamarindo winds down at the end of July with a major professional/amateur competition in both long and short boards, dude. Robert August, the California surfboard manufacturer and star of Bruce Brown's classic surfer film, *Endless Summer*, has a home on the hill overlooking the beach. Unfortunately, as of press time, the bay's waters have been plagued by high fecal count, undoubtedly related to the explosive development in Tamarindo.

The whole of the *playa* is framed to the north and south by two river estuaries that empty into the Pacific.

WARNING: Be careful wading or swimming across the easily accessed estuary to the north between Tamarindo and Playa Grande. The tidal current can be very strong. Wait for low tide.

Locals already know that swimming in the ocean in front of the Barceló Playa Langosta hotel, where the Río San Francisco estuary flows into the Pacific, can be very dangerous because of rip tides. Although it may be an attractive-looking resort, it was built un-

der a cloud of controversy concerning alleged damage to the environmentally sensitive estuary and current non-cooperation with local emergency services. We won't trash talk them – but we won't stay there and we don't recommend it to our readers.

CRIMINAL CONCERN

Recently, a rash of petty thefts in town has kept beach visitors on the defensive. One honeymoon couple lost the luggage they left locked overnight in their rental car, right in front of their hotel's reception entrance. The thieves popped the lock, so be aware. Read all about it in *The Howler*, a fun local paper.

Overall, Tamarindo is a welcoming destination, offering an eclectic social and nightlife, an appealing beach, interesting ecological trips nearby and a variety of hotels and restaurants to please any taste. Get there by plane or express bus from San José. If you're driving, turn west off the Liberia-to-Santa-Cruz road, in the town of Belén, and follow your nose. All but the last few kilometers are paved.

A good general website is www.tamarindo.com and a fun one is www.tamarindobeach.net. The Tamarindo Tourist Office is next to the Jazz Casino and Tamarindo Supermarket.

Adventures & Attractions

ADVENTURES ON WATER

The big sport in Tamarindo is surfing, and Iguana Surf *(☎ 506/2653-0148, www.iguanasurf.net)* is the largest supplier of everything in watersports in Costa Rica. Their large four-story palapa-roofed headquarters and restaurant is on the road to Playa Langosta and the Río San Francisco estuary. They rent and sell boogie boards, beach chairs, beach umbrellas, snorkel gear, sea kayaks and both long and short surfboards. Iguana Surf's

guided sea kayak nature tour on the Río San Francisco estuary, is excellent.

Anyone going deeper can check into Agua Rica Dive Shop *(☎ 506/2653-0094, www.tamarindo.com/agua)* on the main street for organized dive tours, equipment and certification. Day and half-day deep-sea fishing trips are the specialty of Papagayo Excursions *(☎ 506/2653-0254, www.tamarindo.com/papagayo)* at Hotel Diría (they arrange land tours as well). Tamarindo Sportfishing *(☎ 506/2653-0090, www.tamarindosportfishing.com)* offers day and half-day fishing trips out to the rich offshore Pacific grounds.

ADVENTURES ON LAND

ATV tours can be taken from Iguana Surf (see above) on private trails, or with Tamarindo Adventures *(☎ 506/2653-0640, www.tamarindoadventures.net)*. If you want a horseback ride, horses are often corralled up the estuary on the beach in back of Tamarindo Tours *(☎ 506/2653-0078)*. Hourly rates are inexpensive. A number of places rent mountain bikes.

ADVENTURES IN NATURE

A great place to rent horses and get a nature tour of Guanacaste's disappearing dry forests is Casagua Horses – Cantina Tours *(☎ 506/2653-8041)*, near Portegolpe on the main road into the beaches from Belén. Kay Dodge, Ph.D. and her husband Esteban Peraza, are extremely ecological minded and deliver some of the most professional, and most fun, nature tours in Guanacaste and Nicoya.

To see turtles nest in season at Playa Grande – an activity that requires some stamina, a bit of luck, and lots of patience – ask in the Coopetamarindo office on the main drag, where guides have set up a locally based organization. If you're over on Playa Grande, try the Matapalo Conservation Association, which has a small office next to Las Tortugas hotel. This co-op benefits the local community. Sign up at 6 pm for their participant-limited turtle tours.

The world of the turtle is explained at Playa Grande's unique small museum, El Mundo de La Tortuga *(☎ 506/2653-0471)* through a self-guided cassette player presentation in Spanish, English, Italian and German. Admission is about US $6.

Places to Stay

HOTEL PRICE CHART	
Prices are per-night for two people, not including 16% tax	
$	$21-$40
$$	$41-$80
$$$	$81-$125
$$$$	$126-$200
$$$$$	over $200

Surf House *(northern end of the beach, call at Hotel Santo Tomás, in the US ☎ 877/446-0658, 506/2255-0448, fax 2222-3950, www.thesurfhouse.com, 3 bedrooms, 2 full baths, washing machine, telephone, cable TV, $$$$)*. The Surf House is owned by the same owner as the Hotel Santo Tomás in San José, but is much more casual. The two-story rental is a good value for a family or group looking for a laid back vacation in surf-crazy and growing-more-pricey Tamarindo. It's located right on the beach and offers privacy, full kitchen, bed space for 10 in five queen beds and maid service. There's a three-night minimum and maid Seidy will cook for you.

Capitán Suizo

Capitán Suizo *(southern end of beach, ☎ 506/2653-0075, fax 2653-0292, www.hotel-capitansuizo.com, 8 bungalows, 22 rooms, a/c & fans, restaurant, room safe, bidet, refrigerator, pool, $$$$$)*. Capitan Suizo has emerged as an outstanding small luxury hotel right on the Langosta beach. Its gracious gardens host comfortable tropical bungalows with large bathrooms and *al fresco* showers. Standard rooms are in a two-

story building, downstairs rooms feature air conditioning and terraces, and upstairs rooms have breezy balconies. The centerpiece of the gorgeous gardens is the large free-form pool. The bar/restaurant overlooking the pool and white beach serves international cuisine. A four-bedroom apartment over the lobby is available for large families.

Pasatiempo *(1 block off the beach, ☎ 506/2653-0096, fax 2653-0275, www.hotelpasatiempo.com, 11 cabins, 2 suites, air, continental breakfast, restaurant, $$+)*. Pasatiempo means "spending time," and it's a good characterization of the laid-back atmosphere. Rooms are in duplex thatched cabañas, each with a tiny patio with hammock and hand-painted murals inside. Large closets. The rooms were remodeled in mid-2000 to keep up with the competition. Their small tiled pool is next to an open-air bar/restaurant featuring pastas and fish and a festive happy hour. Suites have a king-size bed and sofa bed, plus cable TV. Discount for cash.

Cabinas Marielos *(in town, along the beach road, ☎/fax 506/2653-0141, 17 rooms, in-room safe, cold water only, air or fan, $)*. Not to be confused with the Hotel Marielos farther south down the road, Cabinas Marielos is a budget hotel in the downtown. Its plain but pleasant rooms are set in two buildings that feature blue Adirondack chairs on long porches in front. The upstairs room #10 is the best. The gardens between buildings provide for a cool and colorful atmosphere with trellis-covered walkways. There's a communal kitchen, as well as bicycle and boogie board rentals. It's the best value in the budget category.

Cabinas Marielos

Downtown Tamarindo boasts several other boutique hotels, although not much exists in the lower end of the budget category. The well-established and well-known Hotel Diría *(in US ☎ 866/603-4742, ☎/fax 506/2653-0031, www.tamarindodiria.co.cr, air, cable,*

Hotel Diría

breakfast included, $$$-$$$$) went through two recent remodelings and an expansion in 2000. It's located on the beach in the center of everything and offers a quality continental restaurant under a big palapa roof. If you want a safe bet, check in at the Best Western Vista Villas *(☎ 506/2653-0114, fax 2653-0115, in US ☎ 800/536-3241, www.tamarindovistavillas.com, $$$-$$$$)*, a lovely hotel across from the beach with a view of the ocean from flower-covered balconies. It has rooms and villas.

In a more economical mood? Backpackers can crash at Tito's Camping, near Capitan Suizo's hotel.

Cala Luna

On the other end of the price scale, one of the most luxurious hotel properties is Cala Luna *(in US ☎ 800/503-5202, 506/2653-0214, fax 2653-0213, www.calaluna.com, 21 rooms & villas, air, pool, cable, restaurant, $$$$)*, south toward Punta Langosta. Each individual villa and hotel room is elegantly decorated and exudes comfort. Inviting free-form pool with wet bar. And to top it all, each villa boasts an individual pool and private terrace. We found this hotel particularly lovely in a gorgeous garden setting. A path leads through the woods to a rocky

beach. The poolside restaurant, Cala Moresca, serves romantic dinners. *(Reservations at ☎ 506/2653-0214.)*

A captivatingly, dreamy place is Sueño del Mar *(☎/fax 506/2653-0284, www.sueno-del-mar.com, pool, restaurant, breakfast included, $$$$)*. Despite having only three large rooms, a honeymoon suite, and beachfront bungalow, the "Dream of the Sea" B&B is one of the most appealing and intimate places in Playa Langosta, the southern section of Tamarindo. Pricey luxury.

Places to Eat

Informality is the rule in Tamarindo, so restaurant reservations are not needed.

DINING PRICE CHART	
Prices based on a typical entrée, per person, not including beverage.	
$	under $5
$$	$5 to $10
$$$	$11-$20
$$$$	over $20

As you enter Tamarindo, on the right is the Paris Bakery, often known by its former owner's name, Johan's. For more than baked goods, dine in the restaurant in back, next to the canal, where several crocodiles also lounge. Turn uphill at the crowded El Milagro Hotel & Restaurant and go right a short way for the hotel and restaurant El Jardín del Edén *(☎ 506/2653-0137)*. The "Garden of Eden"offers a fine menu on the lush hillside above the beach. For less formal Tico and gringo food, at the north end of town on the main road is Frutas Tropicales. Its offerings are basic, but good.

Diría Hotel (☎ *506/2653-0031)* has a new chef who serves a tasty international meal poolside at their hotel on the main drag. On the beach at the circle where downtown ends, head to Zullymar, which has been serving good seafood and Tico dishes for a lot of years. Alternatively, try Arrecifes, also overlooking the beach. Walk south from there a short way and enjoy Pedro's, a fish shack restaurant favored by locals and adventurers looking for fresh fish on the cheap. This end of town has a number of nightclub and/or restaurants.

For the very best meal downtown, diners rave over Lazy Wave (☎ *506/2653-0737)* stuck in back of a strip mall on the left as you turn inland (toward Hotel Pasatiempo) in the middle of town. With outdoor seating around a couple of huge trees, this dinner-only restaurant fills up with tourists searching for a special meal. It's not

cheap, but the food is good and the wine bar is hip. For sandwich cravings, walk across the street and inland a half-block to the Shark Bite Deli, where you might need an articulated jaw to eat their build-your-own sandwiches. Free coffee refills!

On the same side of the road, a half-block from the turn, is the Pachanga Restaurant, set in the leafy, vine-covered hotel of the same name. Open for dinners only, this popular place features Mediterranean dining from Chef Sholmy Koren. Nearby is the landmark, Stella's (☎ *506/2653-0127)*, which serves pricey but delicious Nuevo American cuisine al fresco. Free pick up from local hotels. For health food try El Patio Comida Sana.

Heading toward the Playa Langosta end of the beach, pass the thatched roof sports store called Iguana Surf. Their front end, known as Gil's, serves Mexican food for breakfast and lunch. During the evenings the name changes to Gecko's and they serve seafood. Try the chocolate cake.

Our favorite place to have dinner is in the Langosta section at Maria Bonita, on a side street about 200 m/660 feet east of the Barceló. This small hacienda/garden-style eatery features Latin-Caribbean cuisine in a romantic atmosphere.

◆ Playa Grande

A stone's throw north of Playa Tamarindo, but far by dirt road, is Playa Grande (Big Beach), featuring the Baula National Marine Park, created in 1991. Playa Grande is known for the giant leatherback turtles who nest there from October through March. The area also offers tours into the Tamarindo Estuary to see crocodiles and mangroves. The leatherbacks, however, are the main attraction. Leatherback turtles get their name because they have a leathery hide in place of a shell. These enormous sea creatures typically weigh more than 275 kilos (over 600 pounds) but can get as big as two meters (six feet) and weigh in at 680 kilos (1,500 pounds).

Leatherbacks can be gigantic

They lumber ashore mostly at night to lay their eggs. One estimate of the world leatherback population was down to 35,000 turtles, 900 of which nest here at Playa Grande. If you are arriving by air or bus, head to Tamarindo and get a fisherman to ferry you across the first estuary to the Playa Grande Beach.

> WARNING: Be cautious swimming off Playa Grande and especially near the estuary, where people have drowned. Try Playa Ventanas, a bit farther north, for swimming, or explore Playa Carbon, a black sand beach with lots of tide pools.

Places to Stay

Villa Baula *(Playa Grande, ☎ 506/2653-0493, fax 2653-0459, www.hotelvillabaula.com, 20 rooms, 5 bungalows, fans, pool, restaurant, kids pool & playground, TV, $$$)*. The Villa Baula bills itself as an "ecological" hotel and it certainly looks the part. Rustic wooden buildings with barn siding are scattered among the trees in a garden along the beach. The individual, two-bedroom bungalows feature upstairs porches with *al fresco* kitchenettes. There's a very large pool and a huge thatched-roof restaurant that serves German/Indonesian food. Located right next to the Baula National Marine Park and the wildlife refuge.

Villa Baula cabin

Hotel Las Tortugas *(Playa Grande, ☎ 506/2653-0423, fax 2653-0458, www.tamarindo.com/tortugas, air, pool, jacuzzi, restaurant, $$)*. The ecologically oriented Las Tortugas features a friendly staff, turtle-shaped pool, canoe rental and horseback riding, all in a laid-back tropical atmosphere along the beach.

Also well worth considering is the charming Hotel Bula Bula *(☎ 506/2653-0975, US 877-658-2880, www.hotelbulabula.com, breakfast included, $$)*, which features bright comfortable air-condi-

Bedroom at Hotel Bula Bula

tioned rooms, each named for an indigenous Central American animal. This was formerly called Hotel Cantarana. It has a pleasing pool and a very good restaurant. A relatively short walk off the beach is Casa y Casitas Linda Vista *(☎ 506/2653-0474, www.tamarindo.com/kai, $$$)* a 1.2-hectare/three-acre hilltop estate in the dry forest overlooking the ocean. Its beautiful secluded houses are excellent values for groups. The smallest, Casita Linda Vista, sleeps three.

The Rip Jack Inn *(US ☎ 800/808-4605, CR 506/2652-9272, www.ripjackinn.com, $$$)* offers surfers and beachlovers pleasant accommodations.

Surfheads can avoid the Bennys on the beach at Playa Grande Surf Camp *(☎ 506/2653-1074, www.playagrandesurfcamp.com, $$)*. Fifty meters from the beach, this is a low-rent alternative for surfers and backpackers. It offers dormitory digs as well as use of a kitchen, swimming pool, and BBQ.

◆ Playa Junquillal

Playa Junquillal (hoon-key-YAL) is a broad beach, hard against wild grasslands, in a remote part of the Nicoya Peninsula. It's remote enough that the long beach is usually deserted and there is no town to speak of nearby. The surf is what brings most visitors here, but when it's not too strong there's good swimming. This is a beachcomber's paradise. Plus, it's cheaper than Tamarindo.

Places to Stay

The oldest hotel, with colonial-style buildings on a hill facing the sea, is Hotel Antumalal *(☎ 506/2653-0425, antumal@racsa.co.cr, $$$)*, a venerable standard for good accommodations. It is named after the Chilean god of the sun. If you're still feeling South American, dine at a Peruvian restaurant, Lak'Ampu.

Playa Junquillal

If it's true that you pay for what you get, it's worth paying to stay at Iguanazul *(☎ 506/2658-8123, www.iguanazul.com, $$$)*. Set on a breezy ridge by the ocean. This Canadian-owned hotel is the cream of the crop in Junquillal. High-ceilinged rooms in shaded cottages, red tile floors, Mexican tile bathrooms, and a huge freeform pool. It's a pleasure to stay here. Lots of activities.

Pool at Iguanazul

Camp at low-rent Camping Los Malinches, a short distance from the Iguanazul. It offers a little grocery store, showers, bathrooms and manicured garden campsites at the beach ($3). Get a roof over your head at Hotel Hibiscus *(☎ 506/2658-8437, including breakfast, $$)*. Pretty tile work and personal service. Across the street is La Puesta del Sol, an Italian restaurant.

A good website is www.nicoyapeninsula.com.

Central Peninsula

The series of beaches south of Tamarindo lack the denser development of the northern coast, hence have an attraction all their own. They vary from black sand to gray to sandy white and, as in the north, some are better for swimming, while others are known for surfing. Please note we start our coverage from Sámara, despite Nosara being geographically more north, because the road to Sámara is paved all the way.

◆ Santa Cruz & Nicoya

For tourists, the cities of Santa Cruz and Nicoya are central gateways to the beaches of western and southern Nicoya Peninsula. But for Costa Ricans, these cities are traditional farming and cattle ranching centers for the surrounding agricultural areas. Santa Cruz is a sunny and hot small town known euphemistically as the "National Folklore City," although that seems to be a somewhat optimistic label. It is a favorite marketplace for Chorotega pottery, Costa Rica's polished, hand-painted glazed pottery made by the indigenous pre-Columbian Chorotega peoples. After the Conquest, pottery-making in Guanacaste died out, perhaps because it no longer had the same religious significance. However, in recent years it has made a comeback and now high-quality replica pottery from Nicoya/Guanacaste is sold throughout the country. One of the most significant centers is the nearby artisan village of Guaitil, 10 km/6.2 miles to the east, near San Vicente. Here you can watch pottery being made and decorated by the indigenous Chorotega craftsman.

Chorotega pottery

The town has a festive annual celebration on January 15th. You can drive to Guaitil on a scenic but bumpy road.

Hotels and *pensíons* in town are inexpensive, but also very basic. Try the Hotel Sharatoga *(☎ 506/2680-0011, $)*, a half-block or so from the *zocaló*, which offers a miniature pool plus air-conditioners in plain rooms. On the highway is the Hotel La Calle de Alcala *(☎ 506/2680-0000, hotel alcala@hotmail.com, $$)*, a modern appealing hotel with a large pool, pretty courtyard gardens and air-conditioned rooms. Can a place with a swim-up bar be all bad?

Hotel La Calle de Alcala

Nicoya is a much larger city, 25 km/15.5 miles south of Santa Cruz, in the hot, dry flatlands. It is much more commercial and consequently less interesting to tourists – most simply crawl through its traffic on the way to the beach. The in-town place to hire guides to Barra Honda Park is at the park office *(☎ 506/2686-6760)*, across from Nicoya's historic San Blas Church, built in 1644. We can also say that the gasoline station just before town, the one opposite the hospital, has very clean bathrooms, a pleasant surprise at a bad moment. Another pleasant surprise is the Hotel Curime *(☎ 506/2685-5238, $$)*, named after a famous Chorotega chief. It has a cool deep swimming pool, open-air restaurant, sports fields and rooms with or without air conditioning in duplex bungalows. You'll find the Curime just west of town on the way to Sámara and the beach. If you're in the area in

San Blas Church

Hotel Curime dining area

December, the 12th marks the Fiesta de la Yeguita, when a religious parade takes place.

On the road to Monte Romo, four km/2.5 miles south of Hojancha, a farming town south and east of Nicoya, is Monte Alto Lodge *(☎ 506/2659-9394, montealto92@terra.es, $)*, a recent addition to the Cooprena list of eco-lodges. Set up to benefit the local community as well as protect the watershed of the Río Nosara, Monte Alto offers rustic overnight accommodations or an opportunity for a day-trip, perhaps a stop on your way to the beach. Typical food is served, plus visitors can enjoy five km/three miles of walking trails, a huge natural orchid garden, a view of Nicoya Bay from a mountaintop *mirador*, plus the local organizers will take you to visit their farms if you wish.

Barra Honda National Park

Barra Honda National Park is unique in Costa Rica – its 2,295 hectares (5,671 acres) were set aside to protect not the land, but the geological wonders underground. Huge limestone caves are natural phenomena of the park, 14 km/8.7 miles east of Nicoya. Barra Honda Mountain, rising 575 meters/1,891 feet above the dry plain, was thought to be a volcano as late as 1967. Foul odors and strange whooshing sounds coming from the

On a cave tour in Barra Honda

craters that pockmark its slopes convinced local farmers of underground activity. Finally, in 1973, the caves were officially discovered by scientists from the US-based Cave Research Foundation. The strange sounds turned out to be the sounds of millions of bats, and the strong odor came from their thick guano.

Each cave is accessed by a vertical descent, so if you want to explore them, make arrangements the day before with the Park Service (☎ *506/2659-1551)* or show up between 7 am and 1 pm with enough water and sun screen for the hike. A tour takes three to four hours and costs US $50 (including the entrance fee, equipment rental and professional guides. Even if you don't get into spelunking, the white limestone, tabletop mesa at the top of Barra Honda offers breathtaking views of Nicoya, especially from the south edge. Hike up marked trails, but bring plenty of water and stay on the path. With a guide, you can take a six-km/3.7-mile hike on Sendero al Ceibo trail, which leads to a waterfall accented by wispy calcium carbonate formations.

◆ Playa Sámara

This beachfront community is growing in popularity – for very good reasons. Its wide white beach is protected by rock promontories at either end, and an offshore reef, which makes it good for snorkeling. During the dry season, Ticos who own summer homes flock here, although it never gets crowded. And during the off-season, the beach feels deserted, despite the fact that the town is right there behind the palms. Another attractive reason for staying near Sámara (pronounced SAH-mara) is that the road is paved all the way into town. Good, reasonably priced hotels.

South from town, a paved/dirt road snakes along the beach where numerous hotels hide on the right. The second beach to the south is the wide picturesque Playa Carrillo, lined by rows of swaying palms.

Visit online at www.samarabeach.com.

DIRECTIONS

By Air - The airport is at Playa Carrillo, 15 minutes south of Sámara. Daily flights by Sansa (☎ 506/2221-9414, in Sámara 656-0131) leave from Juan Santamaría Airport and Nature Air (☎ 506/2220-3054) has a daily flight from Tobías Bolaños in Pavas. Flight times are subject to change. Most Sámara/Nosara hotels can arrange your pick-up.

By Bus - There is an Empresa Alfaro (☎ 506/2222-2666) express bus from San José leaving at 12:30 pm from between Calle 14, Av 3 & 5. A six-hour trip for about $6. The bus to Nosara leaves earlier. The return bus leaves at 4 am, so don't stay up too late the night before. Call for schedules.

By Car - The road is paved all the way to Sámara and you can reach it from the mainland by crossing on the Tempisque bridge. Follow the signs to the city of Nicoya, make a left into town, and then go straight for Sámara, 36 km/22.3 miles.

Places to Stay & Eat

IN TOWN

Hotel Belvedere *(Sámara, ☎/fax 506/2656-0213, www.*samarabeach.com, 18 rooms, 2 apartments, jacuzzi, air, full breakfast included, restaurant, $$). Cheerful and charming, the Belvedere sits high up on the hill above town, about four blocks from the beach. The cozy double-bedded rooms have balconies or terraces, mosquito netting over the bed, colorful drapes, and are very clean. The dining room is on a wooden deck with a view and cooling breeze. The best part of a stay is the chance to relax in the intimate jacuzzi, set in the middle of a lush garden. The owners, Michaela and Manfred, have been here since 1992. Excellent value, and great monthly rates.

HOTEL PRICE CHART	
Prices are per-night for two people, not including 16% tax	
$	$21-$40
$$	$41-$80
$$$	$81-$125
$$$$	$126-$200
$$$$$	over $200

Hotel Belvedere

Hotel Casa del Mar *(Sámara, ☎ 506/2656-0264, fax 2656-0129, 7*

rooms, jacuzzi, air, refrigerator, restaurant, pool, includes breakfast, $$). This hotel, owned by French Canadians, has both shared or private baths in clean, comfortable rooms around a courtyard. One block from the beach.

Hotel Giada *(Sámara, ☎ 506/2656-0131, fax 2656-0132, www.hotelgiada.net, 24 rooms, pool, pizza, fan, parking, breakfast included, $$)*. This Italian-owned hotel sits on your left as you enter Sámara, 150 meters/493 feet from the beach. The palapa overhang that allowed us to park our car out of the sun was what first caught our attention. Then the large attractive rooms in their pleasant two-story building wrapped around a small, kidney-shaped pool clinched the deal. Clean, at-home atmosphere and reasonable prices.

Hotel Glada

Acuario Apartments (*Sámara, opposite El Ancla restaurant, ☎ 506/2656-0036, www.samarabeach.com, 2 apartments, 4 rooms, 2 houses, cable, air, kitchenettes, $$$)*. This small homey complex of accommodations is only 10 meters/33 feet from the beach and very reasonably priced. It's quiet and comfortable. Angela, the owner, is a Spanish teacher and is available for some free lessons. The houses have four bedrooms each, the apartments, two bedrooms, and the rooms boast coffee-makers. Very clean.

El Ancla Restaurant & Bar (*Sámara, on the beach, ☎ 506/2656-0254*). There are a number of pleasant local eateries and watering holes in Sámara, but the venerable "Anchor" does it best. Fresh seafood and Tico cooking are served under a palapa roof with a cool breeze and plenty of beach in front. After we order, we swim out to catch a few waves bodysurfing and come back in time for fried fish and a cold beer. Who could ask for more? El Ancla is a favorite of locals and tourists alike.

Shake Joe's (*Sámara, 50 meters/160 feet east of beach entrance*). This Dutch-owned bar and restaurant on the beach serves laid-back meals (sandwiches and salads at lunch) under palapa umbrellas. Evening meals feature pepper steak, seafood and pastas, all served with French fries. And then there's the bar. Not surprisingly, it's famous for cocktails and fruit shakes.

Casa Paraiso Hotel & Restaurant (*Sámara, 150 m/500 feet east of supermarket, ☎ 506/2656-0741, www.samarabeach.com, $-$$*). This piece of paradise is a clean, basic nine-room hotel with a very good restaurant attached. Chef Ana, one of the few female chefs around, features an excellent selection of fresh fish and lobster, seafood salad, pasta and meat meals. Other hotel owners eat here.

Villas Playa Sámara

Apartamento Turistas *(☎ 506/2656-0775, $$)* offers a large apartment or a room and free airport pickup.

Villas Playa Sámara *(Playa Sámara, ☎ 506/2256-8228, fax 2220-3348, htlvilla@sol.racsa.co.cr, 62 rooms, air, kitchen, fan, pool, restaurant, breakfast included, $$$)*. The villas here weave back from the wide beach and are stitched along the paths with rows of flowering hibiscus hedges. The red tile-roof villas all feature a kitchenette and sitting area, large bedroom with ample closet space and sliding glass doors that open on a terrace. They come in three sizes, from duplex to single unit with two bedrooms. The pool is wonderfully large (perhaps the best we found) and has a jacuzzi as well as a wet bar with TV. Four km/2.5 miles south of town.

A few kilometers south of Sámara is Playa Carrillo, a gently curved, broad white sand beach lined with palm trees. Very tropical and completely deserted.

◆ Playa Nosara

A favorite area of retired North Americans, Nosara (no-SARA) has bad roads that get worse in the rainy season. North from Sámara, you have to cross three narrow rivers and navigate 28 km/17.4 miles of potholes to a series of individual beaches. None are much different from the other, but we found some of the best accommodations near Playa Guiones. The farming town of Nosara itself lies inland about five km/three miles.

NOSARA

The name comes from folklore. Nosara was an indigenous woman who slit her wrists rather than reveal her tribe's treasure to a rival tribe. Her blood formed the river that bears her name.

The drive north from Sámara, despite a bumpy road, is very pleasant in long stretches as you motor through farm country in the land between the mountains and sea. But as if to spoil you enjoyment, armed robbers have at times held up cars heading to Nosara. Be careful.

The first big beach you come to before Nosara is Playa Garza, a fishing community.

DIRECTIONS

By Air - Nosara has an airport inland (near the town) with a daily flight by Sansa *(☎ 506/2223-4179, in Nosara 682-0856).* Flights leave from Juan Santamaría Airport at 11:30 am, returning at 12:20 pm. Nature Air *(☎ 506/2299-6000, www.natureair.com)* flies twice a week on Tuesdays and Saturdays. Flight times are subject to change, so check first. Most Nosara hotels can arrange pick-up.

By Bus - There is an Empresa Alfaro (☎ 506/2222-2666) express bus from San José leaving at 6 am from Calle 14, Av 3 & 5. A 6½-hour trip costs about US $7. The return bus is scheduled to leave at 12:45 pm. Check first.

By Car - Follow the signs to the city of Nicoya and, once in town, follow signs for Sámara. From Sámara, turn north on the dirt road that runs along the beach. There is an earlier turn, at the bottom of a curving hill a few kilometers before town, which joins this road.

Places to Stay & Eat

Lagarta Lodge *(Nosara, ☎ 506/2682-0035, fax 2682-0135, www.lagarta.com, 7 rooms, breakfast included, fan, parking, pool, $$)*. Lagarta Lodge is a paradise for naturalists, birdwatchers, photographers and adventurous travelers. It's perched on a 40-meter/132-foot cliff (it's a steep ride uphill to the top), with a sweeping vista of the Nosara Biological Reserve and its black beach Pacific shoreline. Several trails are marked for hiking into the lodge's private reserve area bordering the reserve and down to the weaving Río Nosara. Its rooms are plainer than the common areas and beautiful gardens, but the upstairs rooms (#3 & #4) have a balcony and those downstairs boast a little terrace. The mountaintop gets a welcome cooling breeze.

Lagarta Lodge

Casi Paraíso *(Nosara, ☎/fax 506/2682-0173, 5 rooms, breakfast included, restaurant, $$)*. This funky tropical wood hotel, whose name translates as "Almost Paradise," clings to the mountainside along the steep road, about a five-minute walk from the beach. The rustic rooms open onto a large shared porch with big Adirondack chairs and swinging hammocks. The seafood restaurant is a popular and inexpensive eatery.

Casa Romántica *(Playa Guiones, Nosara, ☎/fax 506/2682-0019, casaroma@racsa.co.cr, 7 rooms, pool, restaurant, fan, breakfast included, $$)*. This "romantic Swiss house" is just 20 meters/66 feet off the beach in a large white building. The restaurant, specializing in continental cuisine and seafood, is open for breakfast and dinner only. Guest rooms are big and cool and appealingly decorated.

The Gilded Iguana (*Playa Guiones, Nosara, ☎/fax 506/2682-0259, www.guildediguana.com, 4 rooms, restaurant, $$)*. Very pleasant, large rooms in a hotel building set back a little from the well-known Gilded Iguana restaurant. The popular restaurant is

open 10 to 10, more or less, and is closed Mondays except during football season, when they serve dinner and drinks for Monday night football. This is also the headquarters of Iguana Expeditions (call the hotel and ask for Joe), which runs great sea kayak trips into the reserve.

DINING PRICE CHART	
Prices based on a typical entrée, per person, not including beverage.	
$	under $5
$$	$5 to $10
$$$	$11-$20
$$$$	over $20

Hotel Villa Taype *(Playa Guiones, Nosara, ☎ 506/2682-0333, fax 2682-0187, www.villataype.com, 22 rooms, two pools, restaurant, tennis, air or fan, breakfast included, $$)*. The Taype is a large horseshoe-shaped hotel with accommodations in lovely gardens about 100 meters/329 feet from a beach that offers a good surf break. The rooms are relatively unadorned, but modern and very clean, with hardwood ceilings and white tile floors. Garden bungalows have small patios under thatched roofs. Budget travelers should ask about a smaller room without air for about half-price. Anarchists can pay in cash and avoid the tax.

Café de Paris *(Playa Guiones, Nosara, ☎ 506/2682-0087, fax 2682-0207, www.cafedeparis.net, 18 rooms plus bungalow/suite, air or fan, restaurant, pool, $$)*. Only in Costa Rica can you have a French café that is a bakery, restaurant and hotel rolled into one big croissant. Everything opens at 7 am – the bakery for fresh bread, pastries and baguettes, the pool's swim-up bar for early-risers, and the restaurant for the first of its three meals a day. New rooms built in mid-2000 are across the road.

Doña Olga's *(Playa Pelada, Nosara, no phone, $-$$)*. Olga serves mainly fish and typical Costa Rican food in her beachside open-air restaurant under a big palapa. Very popular with locals and vacationers alike. Open for breakfast and until late at night.

Other dining spots in and around Nosara include La Luna Bar & Grill, with rustic natural wood furniture and fabric tablecloths. It's affiliated with the recently remodeled Nosara Beach Hotel *(☎ 506/2682-0151, www.nosarabeach.com)*, which isn't a bad choice for accommodations. At La Dolce Vita an Italian chef makes good pizza and homemade pasta puddings. Fresh seafood is offered everywhere.

Southern Peninsula

◆ Playa Naranjo

The scenery changes dramatically as the dry hot plains give way to hot lowland forests in the south of the peninsula. The road south to Playa Naranjo ferry is good most of the way, although all the roads in this countryside vary in condition, especially in the rainy season. If you're heading to the southern Nicoya Peninsula from San José, it's more logical to take a ferry across the gulf from Puntarenas. It's now less common for vacationers to use the ferry to Playa Naranjo since a new service runs from Puntarenas to Paquera, a town closer to the southern tip. The road south to Pacquera from Naranjo is passable; unpaved but graded in some stretches.

For an overnight in sleepy Naranjo (which is not as much a town as a ferry dock), a good choice is the Oasis del Pacifico *(☎ 506/2661-1555, wilhow@racsa.co.cr, tennis, pools, fishing, restaurant, $-$$)*. The enchanting Oasis is set on the beach with a sprawling 4.9-hectare/12-acre garden. The simple rooms here have porches with hammocks for lazy living.

If you're in the area for world-class fishing, head a half-hour north of Naranjo for Hotel Bahía Luminosa *(in US ☎ 530/842-3322, in CR 506/2641-0386, www.bahialuminosa.com, pool, restaurant, includes breakfast, $$$)*, an American-owned, low-key resort that specializes in deep-sea fishing, diving trips and local nature tours. Tree-shaded rooms have kitchenettes facing a private bay.

The more popular ferry drops you at the Pacquera dock, five km from Pacquera village, which is about an hour south of Naranjo on a very rough road. It has little to offer, except as a transit point to other attractions. Cabinas Ginana *(☎ 506/2641-0119)* is clean, economical and has a very pleasant restaurant. From Pacquera, the road is paved or graded most of the way, off and on, to Montezuma.

Karen Morgenson Reserve

The "godparents" of the Costa Rican park movement were aspiring fruit farmers, Karen Morgenson and Olof "Nick" Wessberg, who landed in the Nicoya Peninsula on Costa Rica's northwest Pacific coast in 1955. They helped preserve one of the last wilderness areas on the peninsula, Cabo Blanco (White Cape). Tragically, Olof

was senselessly murdered on the Osa Peninsula where the couple worked on the environmental effort that would create Corcovado National Park. Karen continued as a tireless advocate for the ecology until her death in 1994. Her personal legacy is expressed in a 600-hectare/1,482-acre private reserve that bears her name. Stay at a primitive lodge or camp. Contact the grass roots environmental group to learn more *(☎ 506/2650-0607, www.asepaleco.org).*

Curú National Wildlife Refuge

Curú National Wildlife Refuge

This is an anomaly among Costa Rica's protected areas. The core 84-hectare/207-acre wildlife refuge is surrounded by a 1,200-hectare/2,964-acre farm and forest under cooperative protection with the Park Service and the farm's proprietors. The story of Curú's *(☎ 506/2200-5020)* preservation is admirable. Federico Schutt de la Croix established a large plantation here in 1933 and made it clear to his family that he wanted them to follow his philosophy of ecological preservation and sustainable farming. A rich diversity of wildlife includes troops of white-faced capuchin monkeys, howler monkeys, over 222 species of birds, and three types of turtles that use the shore for nesting. Located about seven km/4.4 miles south of Pacquera. Look for the farmhouse up on stilts on your left. Cover yourself with insect repellent before stepping out here. There are volunteer openings. Contact Greg at gmatuzak@hotmail.com.

◆ Playa Tambor

Playa Tambor is a destination somewhat like Papagayo, once fingered as a suitable area for large, all-inclusive beach resorts. The paved airport runway and a ferry dock nearby make access easy. Yet, despite the building of several large resorts outside the little village, that type of exclusive vacation hasn't entirely captured the

heart of the average Costa Rican tourist. The largest mega-resort constructed is the Barceló Tambor Beach Resort, www.barcelotamborbeach.com. The controversy over its environmental impact has died down, but it's still one of the ugliest properties we have ever come across. It may have wonderful luxuries for guests, but the architect must have designed trailer parks before building these row-upon-row of ticky-tacky little boxes.

In the little town of Playa Tambor, however, there are some tempting small hotels that allow you to include the Tambor experience without staying all-inclusive. Turn left onto the main street leading to the beach, then left again and 20 meters/66 feet along the shore find Tambor Tropical *(in US ☎ 866/890-2537, in CR 506/2683-0011, www.tambortropical.com, restaurant, breakfast included, $$$$)*, a beachside B&B that says tropical luxury in every way. Its modern two-story hexangular *casitas* are made of highly polished hardwood and huge sliding glass windows facing the shore. Upstairs rooms have skylights and wrap-around verandas, while those downstairs open onto garden patios. The grounds are beautifully manicured and incorporate a free-form pool in the center. Fox TV's *Temptation Island* was filmed here.

Costa Coral

A very attractive alternative is Costa Coral *(☎ 506/2683-0105, www.costacoral.com, air, cable TV, kitchenette, restaurant, safe, $$$)*, on a corner in the "downtown" area. Although it's a long block or two from the beach, this very private hotel is so well apportioned that it's worth checking in. The six upstairs/downstairs villas are hidden next to a well-stocked gift shop and store complex, with an open-air veranda restaurant above that serves delicious, reasonably-priced meals. Each villa offers a veranda or porch, sitting room with kitchenette, Mexican tile bathroom and queen-size bed. There's a cool little pool and a groovy gift shop across the street, Salsa Gifts.

It's possible to stay in Tambor cheaply at Cabinas El Bosque *(no phone, $)*, just north of town. Safe and secure, it features very basic

rooms in small cabins with fridges and fans. The beach is just a short walk through their heavily wooded grounds. Or, you can stay in luxury while you golf, surf, sail and swim at the original high-standard Costa Rican resort, Tango Mar Beach Resort & Country Club *(☎ 506/2683-0001, www.tangomar.com, restaurant, pool, golf, tennis, air, including breakfast, $$$$)*, south of town. The resort is reached through a gated entrance that leads through its beautiful golf course. The bewitching hotel and villas are on the rise overlooking a pretty, palm tree-lined beach. Rooms have large picture windows facing the sea, while the secluded villas are scattered in the tropical gardens (not all have sea views). The grounds are large enough and privacy great enough that golf carts are used to get around on the paths.

◆ Montezuma

We were predisposed to love Montezuma. Everything we heard, both good and bad, appealed to us. Long a haven for hippies, new-age seekers, tree-huggers, free thinkers, pot-smokers, nature lovers, beachcombers and entrepreneurs, Montezuma is one of the last outposts of undeveloped, beautiful beach towns. But get there soon because word is out. Long-time local residents welcome visitors who respect the environment and the culture – all others can stay home.

Judy's Music Festival here draws crowds, ☎ *506/2642-0090.*

The way into Montezuma is dramatic. From Cóbano, you arrive at the edge of a plateau, with the Pacific Ocean in all its glory before you, and then descend the steep road (paved by the hotel owners so people could get out of town in the rainy season). Beyond Montezuma the road continues south along the sea past hidden rock coves, shady nooks and secluded sand beaches, through a couple of tiny villages, until it reaches Cabuya, the last civilization before the Cabo Blanco Reserve.

Adventures

North of town are expanses of rich white sand beaches between large, dramatic rock outcroppings, deserted except for the occasional pelican. The best swimming is in front of the campgrounds – for a long stretch north of that the currents are strong and tricky and swimming is dangerous. Walk two hours north, passed Playa Grande, to where ocean swimming is safe again and a rainforest

Montezuma beach

waterfall cascades into the sea. Bring water and be sure to wear a hat and sunscreen for this hike. The waterfall is also a popular destination for horseback riders, who come to swim or watch the diving pelicans. We recommend you booking rides through El Saño Banano restaurant *(☎ 506/2642-0919)* in town. Or arrange them with Montezuma Expeditions *(☎ 506/2642-0482, www.montezuma expedtitions.com),* who do a good job with various local excursions. Serious riders should go back up the hill before town to Nature Lodge Finca Los Caballos *(☎ 506/2642-0124, www.naturelodge.net, pool, restaurant, $$)*, with appealing rooms, restaurant, and stables. Learn Spanish with a view while you're here at Horizontes de Montezuma *(☎ 506/2642-0534, www.horizontes-montezuma.com, $)*, a quality German-owned hotel up on the bluff before town.

Nature Lodge Finca Los Caballos

Places to Stay & Eat

Funky little Montezuma town is home to several small restaurants, some good hotels, a couple of loud bars and an eclectic mix of visitors and residents.

El Saño Banano Village Café & Hotel *(☎ 506/2642-0068, $$)* is a landmark in the heart of Montezuma village. Open from 7 am to 9:30 pm daily, El Saño offers the widest selection of food around, including natural foods and lots of fresh fruit dishes and ice cream. Try

our favorite breakfast: homemade yogurt and granola. You know you're in the sticks when the big event of the evening is to join with townsfolk at El Saño and watch a movie (in English) projected on a pull-down screen. El Saño restaurant now rents soundproof rooms around back, complete with direct TV. See below for their resort hotel, Ylang Ylang.

HOTEL PRICE CHART	
Prices are per-night for two people, not including 16% tax	
$	$21-$40
$$	$41-$80
$$$	$81-$125
$$$$	$126-$200
$$$$$	over $200

Hotel La Aurora *(☎ 506/2642-0051, www.playamontezuma.net/aurora.swf, 10 rooms, shared bath and kitchen, coffee and tea all day, $)*. The activist couple that own the Aurora have created the closest thing to a youth hostel as there is in town. The airy Caribbean-style building has a huge upstairs veranda that's crowded with Europeans in hammocks reading Proust and Kierkegaard. Drying towels hang over railings like multinational flags. So get out of bed and make friends. Mosquito netting provided.

Cabinas El Tucán *(no phone, shared bath, taxi service, $)* is owned by an original Montezuma family. The simple Caribbean-style wood cottage is just at the edge of the village heading south along the coast. Austere rooms, but excellent prices.

Turn into town toward the sea and make a left onto the short street north that ends at the campground beach. Along this stretch you'll find the following hotels.

Pargo Feliz *(no phone, 8 rooms, $)*. A big ugly white building that features large clean, basic rooms with tile floors. A connecting porch or upstairs veranda face a lush tropical garden lawn. Walk to the beach. Next door, almost as a continuation of the Pargo's tropical garden, is a tempting little oceanside eatery called Cocolores *($$)*. Very good seafood, pasta, salads, ceviche and more are served in a rustic romantic candlelit setting. Open for lunch and dinner. At the end of the road you'll discover the English-language bookstore and gift shop, Librería Topsy Bookstore.

Follow your nose across the street to the sweet Bakery Café and its small dining porch. Very popular, and for good reason. The cute couple that owns it have a horseback riding tour company (ask at the bakery for details).

Luz de Mono *(in US ☎ 877/623-3198, in CR 506/2642-0010, fax 2642-0090, www.luzdemono.com, coffeemaker, refrigerator, fan,*

View from terrace at Luz de Mono

restaurant, $$$). Luxurious large rooms are set alongside a stream, which forms a moat in front of each one. The huge restaurant opens for lunch and dinner in a large, multi-layered round building covered by a tile roof.

Ylang Ylang Beach Resort - El Saño Banano *(☎ 506/2642-0638, fax 2642-0068, www.elbanano.com, pool, coffeemakers, restaurant, $$$)*. Facing the beach, but hidden in tropical gardens, are eight private bungalows, six rooms and suites in a separate building, plus some accommodations in geodesic domes with kitchenettes and outdoor showers. The bungalows are spread out on the grounds to give you a feeling of being an your own island getaway. Follow cement paths through lovely heliconia to the enticing grand pool, complete with a gushing waterfall at one end. Reservations recommended. Arrive at El Saño Banano Restaurant and the hotel will come and pick you up in their beach buggy (no other vehicles are permitted on the beach).

El Saño Banano Restaurant (AnywhereCostaRica.com)

If you head south along the sea from Montezuma, the road will twist and turn a couple of times past a group of noteworthy establishments within a 10- or 15-minute walk of town.

Playa de los Artistas Restaurant *(no phone, $$)*, across from Los Mangos, may be the best place to eat in Montezuma, if only for its beachside ambiance and crowd of admirers. Open only for dinner, the "Artists' Beach" has just a few tables in back of a small house on the beach. Specialties are seafood, grilled fish and Italian dishes, with daily specials always on offer. Meals are served in large wooden bowls with home-baked bread. Very popular.

Los Mangos *(☎/fax 506/2642-0076, www.hotellosmangos.com, 24 rooms, pool, restaurant, $$)* is one of our favorite Montezuma hotels. Small cabins are arranged in an old mango orchard across the street from the beach. Mango trees are not like apple or orange trees; they grow tall, like oaks, and have large heavy leaves. These comfortable Tahitian-style cabins with porches and hammocks are terraced up the steep hillside. The pool is large and refreshing and has a waterfall, while the restaurant above it is worth a visit. The bright blue birds that may come for scraps are white-throated magpie jays (*Ureca copetona*).

Cabin at Los Mangos

Hotel Lucy *(☎ 506/2642-0273, across from Los Mangos, $)*. Backpackers rejoice! Lucy's has not been torn down or swept away by the sea – at least not yet. Directly on the rocky beach (not for swimming) and across the street from Los Mangos, little Hotel Lucy clings to the shore with its rustic rooms, with or without fans, and good view from the top story. It has a tiny soda serving Tico fare.

Las Cascadas *(☎ 506/2642-0057, $)*, next to Los Mangos, is a basic hotel with an inviting thatched-roof restaurant alongside a cascading waterfall of the Río Montezuma that flows down to the sea. It's a popular place to sit and relax in the positive ions, thinking positive thoughts, while munching on fresh seafood and nursing a cold brewsky.

Amor de Mar *(☎ 506/2642-0262, www.amordemar.com, restaurant, breakfast included, $$-$$$)*. The "Love of the Sea" hotel is one of those treasures that you sometimes stumble upon when fate allows. If you're lucky enough to stumble this way, stop and stay at this lovely two-story Caribbean-style *casa*. It's built of highly varnished tongue-and-groove wood and features a large lawn on a seaside promontory.

Casa Luna at Amor de Mar

◆ Leaving Town

After Amor de Mar, the road runs south, past nooks and crannies of coast, secluded sandy beaches, freshwater streams, rocky shores, a little fishing village and lots of forest. It leads to the town of Cabuya, and two km/1.25 miles farther brings you to the entrance of Cabo Blanco Absolute Reserve (no relation to the vodka). This is a great drive, even though the road is a bit bumpy. Also extraordinary is the Cabuya town cemetery (used as a graveyard since pre-Co-

Amor de Mar

lumbian times according to locals), located on a small, wooded, rocky island about 100 meters/329 feet offshore. You can walk to it when the tide is out, and local funerals are scheduled to coincide with the tides. A metaphor of life's ebb and flow.

Hotel Celaje *(☎ 506/2642-0374, celaje@sol.racsa.co.cr)* is an isolated but charming little hotel on the shady road just before Cabuya. Unusual A-frame, two-story cabins have a bedroom on the second floor. One of the hotel's best features is its small, pristine pool where we swam on a brutally hot day after enjoying a delicious lunch. From here you can see the island cemetery of Cabuya.

◆ Cabo Blanco Absolute Nature Reserve

This is the largest single area in Costa Rica set aside as an "Absolute Reserve," which absolutely restricts the impact of humans. But that doesn't mean you can't enjoy it. To aid their conservation goal, Cabo Blanco limits entrance and provides minimal facilities. You can hike in and hike back out along marked trails. The ranger station has good maps of the various trails in the 1,172-hectare/2,895-acre reserve.

What's so great about so few people entering the is that wildlife abounds – variegated squirrels, mantled howler monkeys, white-throated capuchin monkeys, agouti, white-nosed coati, even jaguarundi. Off the tip of the shore, Isla Cabo Blanco is a bird breeding preserve, home to 400 pairs of brown boobies. Cabo Blanco got its name from the Spanish explorers who saw the thick layers of white bird excrement on the island's rocks.

Baby squirrel monkey (Eric Delmar)

◆ Malpais & Santa Teresa

Malpais and Santa Teresa are two beaches on the west side of Cabo Blanco with their attraction enhanced by their remoteness. The road that cuts across the peninsula tip from Cóbano, the town before Montezuma, is usually in terrible condition. But that seems to suit everyone just fine. Combined with the fact that Malpais means "Bad Country," you've got tourists staying away in droves. What they're missing is miles of deserted shore, scattered little beach hotels and rough surf that excites experienced surfers. Good maps to this area are shown on www.nicoyapeninsula.com.

Places to Stay & Eat

Frank's Place *(☎ 506/2640-0096, $)*, at the crossroads into town, is a popular place to stay. Franks offers Internet, a gift shop, liquor store, real estate, tours and a shuttle service, not to mention cabañas and a favorite restaurant by the pool.

Turning south, 200 meters, look for the appealing Hotel Oasis *(☎ 506/2640-0259, www.nicoyapeninsula.com/malpais/oasis, $$-$$$)*. Super dudes should bogey on down to Mal País Surf Camp & Resort *(☎ 506/2640-0061, pool, restaurant, www.malpaissurfcamp.com, $-$$)*, a Malpais institution that has a loyal following. Accommodations run the gamut from open air *ranchos* (hut-like accommodations) and bunkbed dorms to attractive individual bungalows. The bar in the main lodge is the happening place.

Hotel Oasis

Eat Italian at Albinat Dulce Magia, opposite Cabinas Bosque Mar. Turn there for Mar Azul *(☎ 506/2640-0098)*, a pleasant beachside bungalow hotel with a small restaurant on the sand. Piedra Mar, 100 meters/329 feet west of Cabinas Laura Mar and right on the beach, serves wonderful fresh seafood. Perched on a rocky promontory at the south end of the rugged Malpais coast road

is the Sunset Reef Marine Lodge *(☎ 506/2282-4160, www.sunsetreefhotel.com, $$$)* is the area's top hotel. It features large rooms with air conditioning, a nice pool, good restaurant and bar, and offers a myriad of activities.

Sunset Reef Marine Lodge

North from Franks is Santa Teresa Beach's diverse assembly of rustic cabañas and cute hotels. We liked Hotel Buenos Aires *(☎ 506/2640-0254, $$)* up the hill on the left. Small, with a good Argentinean restaurant attached. On the beachside is the Trópico Latino Lodge *(☎ 506/2640-0062, www.hoteltropicolatino.com, $$)*, a charming little cottage hotel that boasts huge rooms relatively close to the beach. Pool, jacuzzi and Italian restaurant round out the good value. Another appealing beach place is Ranchos Ituana *(no phone, www.ranchositauna.com)*, a hip hotel, and restaurant a bit farther along.

Trópico Latino Lodge

About six km north and a bit more upscale is the French-owned Milarepa (☎ 506/2640-0023, www.milarepahotel.com, $$$), which reflects a wispy Indochine ambiance and is absolutely gorgeous. Lovely open-air feel, tropical gardens, rocky beach and a gourmet French restaurant to die for. Have a glass of wine; it's good for your heart.

Pacifica

The area we're calling Pacifica encompasses the Central Pacific coast from Puntarenas, a major shipping port and gateway to the Nicoya Peninsula, down to Dominical, a surfer's paradise that eco-tourists are beginning to discover. Inland, the soaring Talamanca mountains are the playgrounds of the cloud forest-dwelling quetzal birds, and the valleys are the fruit and coffee basket of Costa Rica. The country's size means that you can easily reach the finPacificae sandy beaches here for quick weekend getaways from San José. Adventurous drivers can follow the Inter-American Highway along mountain ridges offering views that go on forever. So get on a bus, rent a car, hop a plane and get down to yet another part of Tico paradise.

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To reach the shore at Puntarenas from San José follow the Inter-American (General Cañas) Highway north and watch for the signs near Barranca at Km 101. For beaches south, including Jacó and Manuel Antonio, follow the Coastal Highway from Alajuela through Atenas to Orotina and follow the signs for Jacó. This is a winding mountain road that makes for an exciting drive – the bus drivers who run this route are amazing. If you prefer a less dramatic way, go to Puntarenas and turn south past Puerto Caldera back toward Orotina, follow the sign for Jacó on a modern highway. It's an extra half-hour or so drive time, but it avoids the higher mountains.

Puntarenas

Puntarenas began life as Costa Rica's premier Pacific deep-sea port and popular seaside destination for Costa Ricans. A short ferry ride across the gulf now brings much better beaches within reach, so most foreign tourists find themselves just passing through. But the Spanish Conquistadors who settled here in 1522 found the

protected Gulf of Nicoya ideal as a port city. It was to here that, on Christmas Day, 1843, the English captain, William Le Lacheur, sailed looking for cargo. His success at transporting coffee beans to Europe fueled the country's prosperous coffee boom. Good times for Puntarenas and Costa Rica.

Over the years, wealthy businessmen, prostitutes, workmen, families, vacationers, fortune seekers, travelers, as well as seasoned sailors of the town's fishing, freight, and mother-of-pearl fleets, gave Puntarenas a unique rough-and-tumble seaport ambiance – but not so much anymore. The long beachfront was cleaned up in 1999, and Puntarenenses (what locals call themselves) are returning to the downtown again. Travelers used to dread getting "stuck" in Puntarenas overnight, but with the revitalization effort, reasonable prices and few tourists, it now makes a pleasant stop for savvy travelers, just a two-hour drive west of San José.

The long Paseo de Turistas malecón is the city's pride and joy – and so it should be. Seaside, the sandy beach stretches for several kilometers. Lined with palms, helado (ice cream) vendors, playgrounds, picnic areas, soccer players, swimming dogs and frolicking families, the beach and the paseo feature a broad sidewalk that attracts joggers, strollers and lovers walking hand in hand.

Paseo de Turistas

Along the way there are some seaside restaurants and crowded gift shops, a favorite of passengers from small cruise ships, which stop at the refurbished waterfront pier. At the very tip of the sandy strip there is a public park and private yacht club.

The Catholic cathedral on Av Central, between Calle 5 and 7, has porthole-style windows. Built in 1902, after a fire destroyed the original 1850 structure, its walls are fortress thick. Nearby, the Casa de Cultura houses an art gallery and museum, plus an interesting maritime museum, Museo de Historia Marina.

Carnavale is a huge event in Puntarenas. Usually held at the beginning of February, it features fishing tournaments, parades, bullfights, theater, dances, rock concerts, sport tournaments, fireworks and the election of the Queen of the Carnival.

On the Saturday closest to July 16th the town comes alive again for the Fiesta del Virgin del Mar, a celebration rooted in Costa Rican folklore. According to the legend, four fishermen were caught in a bad storm at sea in 1913. In their prayers for deliverance they prom-

1. Municipal Pool
2. Park
3. Yadrán Beach Resort
4. Playa Naranjo car ferry
5. Park
6. Hotel Las Brisas/ Greek Restaurant
7. Michaels Hotel
8. Bierstube Restaurant
9. La Caravelle
10. La Yunta Steak House
11. Restaurant Aloha
12. Hotel Tioga
13. Stadium
14. Red Cross Hospital
15. Beachside Sodas
16. Cruise ship dock
17. Gran Hotel Imperial
18. Main bus terminal
19. Tourist center & shops
20. Gas station
21. Market (mercado)
22. Banks
23. Paquera ferry dock
24. Police
25. Casa de la Cultura Museum
26. Church/Plaza

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ised to organize a feast and boat procession in honor of their patron saint, St. Carmen. Since then all the boats in the harbor string decorative lights and colorful banners on their masts during festival time. Sailing regattas and bike races give way to evening dances, fiestas and lots of drinking.

The town docks are the embarkation points for several entertaining boat tours into the Gulf of Nicoya. The cheapest way to get a boat ride is to take one of the ferries as a walk-on passenger. But more fun are day-trips to Isla Tortuga, a private island where passengers have lunch, swim, snorkel or explore. Tour firms arrange transportation from San José if you're just going for a day-trip. This includes round-trip passage by bus, breakfast,and lunch on the island or on a boat. Try Bay Island Cruises (☎ 506/2258-3536, www.bayislandcruises.com), Tortuga Island Tours (☎ 506/2661-2508), or Calypso Tours (☎ 506/2256-2727, www.calypsocruises.com), which also offers a trip to Punta Coral private reserve. Prices vary.

Tours to the seabird reserves on Guayabo, Negritos and Los Párajos islands are available from Cata Tours (☎ 506/2296-2133). For extra thrills, hire a launch with a guide to visit the abandoned San Lucas Island, Costa Rica's equivalent of Devil's Island. Last but not least, Cruise West ships (see page 118) dock in Puntarenas.

◆ Isla del Coco

It is from Puntarenas that the dive adventure ships head to sea for Isla del Coco, 535 km (335 miles) out in the Pacific. Besides being a natural wonder and fabulous dive spot, its modern fame came as

Chatham Beach on Isla del Coco

Underwater Isla del Coco

the supposed island that housed Steven Spielberg's dinosaur playground, Jurassic Park. Chatham, one of its two protected bays, has rock-carved graffiti left by ancient mariners who stopped here.

Isla de Coco was a safe offshore haven for pirates and corsairs preying on Spanish galleons. Sir Francis Drake and the Portuguese pirate Benito Bonito are two of the many buccaneers said to have anchored here. The isolated isle is also said to have inspired Robert Louis Stevenson's novel, *Treasure Island*. In 1684, pirate William Thompson is believed to have buried the wealth looted from the coffers of Peru, known as the fabulous "Treasure of Lima," on Cocos. Centuries of treasure hunters have failed to unearth its secrets.

DID YOU KNOW? "Pieces of Eight" coins were called that because they could be broken into eight pieces.

But the secret is out about its underwater treasures – Cocos may offer the best deep-sea diving in the world. Hammerhead sharks are as plentiful in its clear waters as hammers in a hardware store. The Okeanos Aggressor (US ☎ 800/348-2628, CR ☎ 506/2289-3333, www.aggressor.com) is one of the two leading dive groups; the other is Undersea Hunter (US ☎ 800/203-2120, CR ☎ 506/2228-6613, www.underseahunter.com). A trip to Cocos usually lasts nine days, with six days of diving. Best times seem to be May through November, the rainy season.

◆ Places to Stay & Eat

If you're staying in Puntarenas, the hotels along the paseo are the most pleasant, with prices around US $50-$80. Choose from the Yadrán Beach Resort (☎ 506/2661-2662, www.puntarenas.com/yadran, $$-$$$), Hotel Tioga (☎ 506/2661-0271, www.hoteltioga.com, breakfast included, $$) or Michaels Hotel (☎ 506/2661-4646), a small, clean hotel owned by a personable Greek-Canadian.

HOTEL PRICE CHART	
Prices are per-night for two people, not including 16% tax	
$	$21-$40
$$	$41-$80
$$$	$81-$125
$$$$	$126-$200
$$$$$	over $200

Hotel Tioga

La Yunta Steak House (☎ 506/2661-3216, $$-$$$) is our favorite eatery and a required stop when we're in town. It has a large wood veranda on two levels overlooking the paseo. The menu features thick juicy steaks and fresh seafood. Prices are quite reasonable and the place has an old-fashioned formality that makes every meal feel like a Sunday dinner. Take a stroll and have a snack at the Restaurant Strambolla Aloha (☎ 506/2661-2375), seaside on the paseo. For delicious traditional French cuisine in a bistro atmosphere, head for La Caravelle (☎ 506/2661-2262, $$-$$$), between 21 and 23 on the paseo. Around since the early 1980s, a carved carousel horse gives the restaurant its name. Papi's Pizza, also on the paseo, is American owned and makes good sandwiches. Bierstube (☎ 506/2661-0330, $$) is an out-of-place German and seafood restaurant. Meat and fresh fish dishes are pretty good, and certainly above average for a beer garden.

◆ Carara Biological Reserve

The way down to the beaches of Pacifica, south of Orotina, one of the biggest fruit growing areas of Costa Rica, passes the important 5,242-hectare (12,952-acre) Carara Biological Reserve. This reserve straddles the transition zone between tropical moist forest and tropical wet lowland forest, with a diverse flora mix that attracts a wide variety of wildlife. Its most spectacular resident is the scarlet macaw, whose brightly colored feathers are most easily seen from the Tarcole River bridge, early morning or late afternoon when the birds flock to and from the nearby mangroves and the reserve. You can't miss the bridge; it always has cars parked along its side. Gaping people look down, not for macaws, but for American crocodiles. The big (up to four meters/13 feet!) ugly prehistoric beasts often sun themselves on the muddy banks below the bridge. This is a required stop for tours and should be for you too. Remember to lock your car, or take turns staying with it; lots of luggage theft occurs here. The ranger station and entrance is three km/1.9 miles south of the bridge.

DID YOU KNOW? Over 135 species of neo-tropical birds migrate between North America and Central America each year.

Whiteface capuchins

If you are driving the dramatically winding back road from Atenas to Orotina to get to Jacó, don't pass without stopping at El Mirador del Cafetal Restaurant (www.cafetal.com), perched on the edge of a steep cliff, about half way along the route. This eatery, affiliated with El Cafetal Hotel, features spectacular views and the best soups served in all of Central America – especially the sopa Azteca. Along with good food and coffee, there is an interesting small gift shop.

Jacó

The town of Jacó (hah-CO) is a weekend hotspot for beach-going Ticos and tourists alike. Because of its proximity to San José, Jacó is one of the country's most developed beach towns – but developed in Tico style, rather than resort style. The fun-loving, happy-go-lucky beach town is essentially both sides of a main street that parallels the playa. It spreads out in a valley along the horseshoe bay and features low-rise hotels, funky restaurants, surfboard shops, bars, a disco and an unimpressive gray beach. Rough surf and strong currents limit safe swimming to calm days, so Jacó is popular with surfers – and sun worshippers. (If it's rough surf, swimmers can

head to the public pool behind Internet café, Il Girasol, next to the Mas por Menos supermarket.) Do not leave valuables on the beach if you're swimming; petty theft is common.

Jacó is not an eco-destination but, for a social scene, it's hard to beat. And it's a popular weekend retreat for students in San José Spanish-language schools. The two-hour bus journey is offered frequently from the Coca-Cola in San José (Calle 16 and Av 143). Once you're in town, stop in Books & Stuff, across from the bakery, to load up on used paperbacks for your reading pleasure – or CDs for your personal stereo.

◆ Places to Stay & Eat

North of Jacó

Villa Caletas (☎ 506/2637-0505, fax 2222-0303, www.hotelvillacaletas.com, pool, 2 restaurants, cabin-suites, air, cable, $$$$-$$$$$) bills itself as "close to heaven," and it is – in more ways than one. Part of its heavenly atmosphere comes from the location, capping a high cliff overlooking the Pacific – with sunsets to die for. The main tropical Victorian mansion features eight beautiful guest rooms and antique-filled public areas. In the manicured gardens are 20 secluded individual villas, a master suite with personal pool, and a grand overhanging infinity pool. Perfect for honeymooners. Even if you don't stay here, enjoy the old world charm of this wonderful hotel by joining guests and locals to watch the sunset at the bar or restaurant. The elegant restaurant features a new chef,

Villa Caletas

Café/bar at Villa Caletas

Vincent Jean Pierre Bountinaud, formerly of Le Monastère in Escazú. Look for the private road on the right, about two km/1.25 miles south of Punta Leona.

Los Sueños Marriott

Los Sueños Marriott Resort (Playa Herradura, 2 km/1.25 miles north of Jacó beach, in US ☎ 800/228-9290, in CR ☎ 506/2630-9000, fax 2630-9090, www.marriott.com, 201 rooms & suites, pool, lighted tennis courts, conference rooms, spa, marina, air, golf course, mini-bar, 4 restaurants, air, phone, bar, valet parking, $$$$-$$$$$). Los Sueños, or The Dreams, and its sister Marriott hotel outside San José are two of the most luxurious and upscale large hotels in Costa Rica. The Jacó property is related to the surrounding par 72, 18-hole golf course designed by Ted Robinson. A new yacht marina has been added to attract the international sailing crowd and the protected harbor already lures small cruise ships. The huge Spanish mission-style hotel is painted an adobe brick color, with arched hallways and brick Catalan vaulted ceilings in the downstairs lounge. Though it is located on a dark sand Pacific beach, no one bothers to swim in the sea. Instead, everyone chooses the long, canal-like swimming pool that wanders among waterfalls and islands of gardens with rows of sun chairs to the swim-up bar.

In Jacó

Hotels and restaurants line the main street that parallels the beach.

At the north end of beach, which once was the center of town, Restaurant Santimar is a sentimental favorite that still delivers tasty Tico delights and fresh seafood in a small, appealing open-air

dining room next to the beach. Stop by their Caribbean colonial store for ice cream when it's hot out. The convivial hostess from Holland also rents very basic rooms for about US $15.

The Copacabana

The Copacabana Hotel (in US ☎ 866/436-9399, in CR 506/2643-3131, www.copacabana hotel.com, pool, $$) is a popular beachfront hotel, with a beachfront terrace restaurant. Try their blackened tuna.

For those readers who knew Jaco in the old days, we're sad to report that Gilligan's (a NJ-style diner & B&B) is gone, and Chatty Kathy's went years ago. Change isn't always good.

On the main road, Cabinas La Cometa (☎ 506-643-3615, $) is a motel with large, clean, basic rooms with private or shared bath. Garden setting.

Cabinas Restaurant Alice (☎ 506/2643-3061, pool, cable, $), on a side street to beach, features new attached garden rooms – tiled outside and plain inside – with a big típico restaurant (order the butterfly shrimp). Family run, super clean.

Head down Calle Hidalgo to the beach and turn left to La Paloma Blanca (☎ 506/2643-1893, iwann@mailcity.com, $$), a duplex house with garden rooms and beachside suites. It's also available as a half-house weekly or monthly. Very large rooms, verandas and a partitioned pool (one half for each side of the house). Absolutely gorgeous décor inside and a bucolic butterfly garden outside.

There's a dependable Best Western (US ☎ 800/528-1234, CR ☎ 506/2643-1000, www.bestwestern.com, $$) on the beach, but one of the most interesting boutique hotels is off the

Best Western Jacó

beach – the Mar de Luz (☎ 506/2643-3259, www.mardeluz.com, kitchenettes, pool, children's *pool, $$)*. In the main building of this Dutch-owned hotel, the upstairs features junior suites (although they lack kitchens, as are offered in lower-level accommodations). Rooms 10 through 20 are fascinating, rounded river stone lodges, with exposed stonewalls. They have smaller rooms, but include kitchenettes and a sitting area. Numbers 8 and 9 are cute and by the pool.

Pools at Mar de Luz

If you follow the main road south, along the beach and make a right after the bridge, you'll come to more hotels as the bay curves around. The Arenal Pacifico *(in US ☎ 786/755-1101, in CR 506/2643-3419, www.arenalpacifico.com, pool, jacuzzi, restaurant, including breakfast, $$)* impressed us a great deal. Their property features big rooms and master suites face the beach, with lovely riverside gardens, cool pool and a restaurant. Good value can also be had at Canciones del Mar *(☎ 506/2643-3273, www.cancionesdelmar.com, $$$),* which offers on-the-beach suites, pool and gardens. Other hotels worth considering include the basic Hotel El Jardin *(☎ 506/2643-3050, pool, bar, air*), and Paraíso del Sol *(☎ 506/2643-3250, www.paraisodelsolcr.com, pool cable, air, kitchenettes*), a very good deal, located on the road behind Pops.

Arenals Pacifico

The best sushi in town is at Tsunami Sushi, upstairs in the Il Galeone Shopping Center, next to the bank in the center of town. If fish isn't your favorite, head next door to Nacho Daddy's, a Mexican food restaurant in the same locale. Tico tacos. Nacho's is a swinging hot spot at night, drawing crowds of all ages to its bar and dance floor.

For quieter dining, Restaurant Emily is well recommended for typical Tico food and *mariscos* (seafood). It's a small, open-air restaurant on the main street, behind some flowering bushes and side gardens. Monica's Pasta, near the beach, features tasty pasta, salads and brushette. Very popular. Good drinking can be found nearby at Bohio's Bar. A perennial favorite is Bar & Restaurant Marisuería El Barco, where they serve seafood, pizza, and ice cream, or Caliche's Wishbone, with a wide variety of offerings. El Hicaco, on the beach, is good for Tico grub. Whatever your palate, you won't lack for dining choices in Jacó, although finding cheap can be a challenge. On the main road there are many more popular-with-surfer bars and eateries that have a party atmosphere – no need to name them, you can't miss 'em. *Buen Provecho*.

◆ Adventures

Where there are people, there are things to do. Learn to surf at the Academy of Surfing (☎ *506/2643-1948*) or any of the many surf shops downtown. These include Chosita del Surf, Jacó Surf, El Surf, Surf City (is there a theme here?), Mango Surf and Mother of Fear Surf. Experienced or beginner sea kayakers can go to a secluded bay or an inland river trip with Kayak Jacó *(☎ 506/2643-1233, www.kayakjaco.com)*.

Ride horses to the mountaintop and ride along the beach for 2½ hours with American-owned Equestrian Center (☎ *506/2643-1569, www.horsetours.com*), located opposite the side road to the Marriott Los Suenos hotel.

Latin Outdoors *(☎ 506/8383-1708, outdoors@latinmail.com)* feature mountain biking adventures in the woods where it's a little

cooler. Ride 10 km/6.2 miles at night with helmet flashlights to a moonlit waterfall. Experienced bikers can ride to a protected wildlife sanctuary with miradors, then hike to a mountaintop. The ride back down to the beach begins at sunset.

We are not big fans of the local canopy tour on the way to Playa Hermosa. The best nearby experience for that is the Original Canopy Tour *(in US ☎ 305/433-2241, in CR 506/2291-4465, www.canopytour.com/mahogany.html)*, located at a private reserve called Mahogany Park 7½ km/three miles from the town of San Mateo on the highway back toward Orotina. It includes Iguana Park *(☎ 506/2240-6712)*, part of a research and preservation project for green iguanas. In the reserve you can learn about the prehistoric beasts in their education center or eat the tasty beasts in their restaurant. Combine it with a zip through the trees on the adjacent canopy tour.

If you're into *bailando* (dancing) the cavernous La Central Disco is the long established place to go late at night. We offer a word of caution, however, against bringing valuables with you or indulging in getting high or drunk here. Tourists out of control have been targeted for theft and, in the case of young women, sexual attack. In general, Jacó has had more than its share of B&Es, automobile smash and grabs, and other serious problems thanks to the introduction of crack cocaine. On a lighter side, beautiful *objects de arte* can be found at the high-quality souvenir and art shop, La Heliconia Art Gallery, on the main street.

Playa Hermosa

The next beach south might be a good alternative for travelers who like the area but don't fancy Jacó. It's a long, surfer-favored coast that's less-developed than Jacó – as are all the endless beaches that stretch south from here to Quepos. Hotel Villa Hermosa *(☎ 506/2643-3373, $$)* is a surfer hangout with a pool, kitchen privileges and mountain bike rentals. A solid choice for surfers or tourists like us is Hotel Fuego del Sol *(in US ☎ 800/850-4523, in CR 506/2289-*

Hotel Fuego del Sol

6060, www.fuegodelsolhotel.com, pool, restaurant $$), on the oceanfront. A really cool lodge is Cabinas Las Arenas (☎ *506/2643-7013, www.cabinaslasarenas.com, restaurant, $-$$*), a surf hotel right on the beach, near the soccer pitch. They also offer a secure camping area and a good restaurant. Cheap eats can be had at the Goola Café or Jungle Surf Café, while cheap digs can be found at Cabinas Rancho Grande *(☎ 506/2643-7023, cabinasranchogrande@hotmail.com)*. Apartments that sleep five are available at at Casa Pura Vida *(☎ 506/2643-7039, www.casapuravida.com, $$$)*, which has air conditioning and a pool. On the next beach, Estrella Este (one of the two "star" beaches), seek out the charming Auberge Du Pelican (☎ *506/2778-8105, www.aubergepelican.com, pool, restaurant*) for a pleasant stay.

Cabinas Las Arenas

Quepos & Manuel Antonio National Park

Unlike the hot and dry beaches of Guanacaste, the country south of Jacó transits to an increasingly humid and hot climate, creating a more tropical landscape. Manuel Antonio Park and its many hotels sits on the other side of a mountain ridge from the small town of Quepos, about two hours south of Jacó. Before the tourism boom, Quepos survived on fishing and agriculture. It began its life as a company town, built in the 1930s to support the United Fruit banana plantations that lined the coastal plain. By the 1950s, production of African palm oil became the main source of income, after Panama disease destroyed the banana crop. A few small company towns live on, distinguished by the geometrical arrangement of the turquoise houses, some built on stilts, usually around a soggy soccer field. Other agro-industries have sprung up to break the mono-crop de-

pendency: Teak trees are harvested for furniture, gmelina trees for paper pulp, and green fields of rice dot the landscape. The recently improved coastal road follows the route of the old banana train and river crossings are still made over rickety, single lane, former train trestles. Riding south from Playa Estrillos Oeste the road curves inland from the coast through a medium-sized town (where you'll probably wait in line for the bridge) of Parrita, 25 km/15.5 miles from your destination. You reach the sea again at Quepos.

For general information – from weather and news headlines to adventure resources – log on to www.pueretoquepos.com.

◆ Quepos

Quepos (KEH-pos), a funky little town just over a small mountain ridge from Manuel Antonio National Park, is filled with a variety of hotels and B&Bs, plus local and *extranjero* (foreigner)-owned restaurants. You'll know you're here when you see the wide *malecón*, sea wall. Check out the farmer's market on the weekend. In the evening, along the front row of buildings facing the *malecón*, street vendors hawk *parejos* (colorful beach wraps), jewelry and fancy carved hash pipes – big sellers in this bohemian seaside harbor village.

As you might guess, Quepos offers lower rates for hotels and cheaper eateries than the Manuel Antonio area, which begins up on the twisty road that runs over the mountain and down to the park. Turn at the last left in the downtown area and follow the street past the soccer field. After a sharp, hairpin right turn you're on your way uphill. We once walked the seven-km/4.4-mile trip to the park. It was great at the time, but automobile traffic has increased enough to make it less than bucolic now. You can also catch a crowded, half-hourly-ish bus (about 50¢) to the park entrance from the bus station next to the market. Taxis to the park are around US $5 from town.

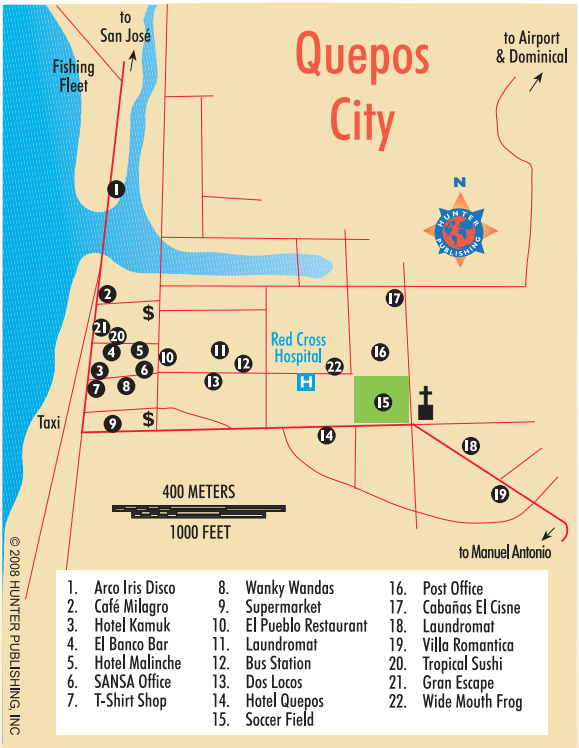
AUTHOR TIP: If you've come in by bus from San José, buy your return tickets well in advance; seats sell out, especially for Sunday afternoons and evenings.

◆ Odd & Ends

TICKETS: Lynch Travel Service *(☎ 506/2777-1170, www.lynchtravel.com)* books tours, rents cars and arranges airline tickets.

LAUNDRY: There are two laundry services of note. One is alongside the bus depot and the other is on the road to Manuel Antonio, just past the soccer field. Drop-off and pay, and coin-op. Look for the *Lavanderia* signs.

KEY TO HAPPINESS: If you lock your keys in your car as we once did (we're so embarrassed), phone Vidrios y Cerrajeria Santa Martha *(☎ 506/2777-0776, cell 393-6124)* and they'll come and rescue you.



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GIFTS: Get fragrances and more at La Botanica in Manuel Antonio. Also patronize the Amazing Arts Gallery at the Mono Azul Hotel, the Mot Mot Boutique in downtown Quepos, La Buena Nota near the beach, and Si Como No's Regáleme Gifts. In Quepos town, be sure to stop in L'Adventura Boutique *(☎ 506/2777-1019)*. They have a big selection of products and gifts.

INFORMATION: *Quepolandia* is a locally published monthly magazine distributed free. Their office is next to two bars and an Internet café in Quepos; you can't miss it unless you stop too long at the Epicentro and Tio Fernando's bars first. And Tio's is worth a stop.

DINNER AND A MOVIE: Jim Damalas, the owner of Si Como No, was once a big shot in Hollywood. Now Jim shows a flick in a super cool and comfortable 46-seat movie theater with Dolby stereo and popcorn, at his hotel. If you're not staying at Si Como No, eat dinner there and ask for tickets (which should be free to diners) as soon as you arrive. You can also buy tickets, but they often sell out early. Check with the hotel *(☎ 506/2777-0408)* to find what's playing.

DRY SEASON: Hotel Mono Azul in Manuel Antonio hosts daily AA meetings. Check with them for times *(☎ 506/2777-1954)*.

EMERGENCY: Phone the Rural Guard *(☎ 506/2777-0196)* or Quepos Hospital *(☎ 506/2777-0922)*.

TALK IS CHEAP: Learn Spanish at La Escuela de Idiomas D'Amore *(☎ 506/2777-1143, www.escueladamore.com)* between Quepos and Manuel Antonio.

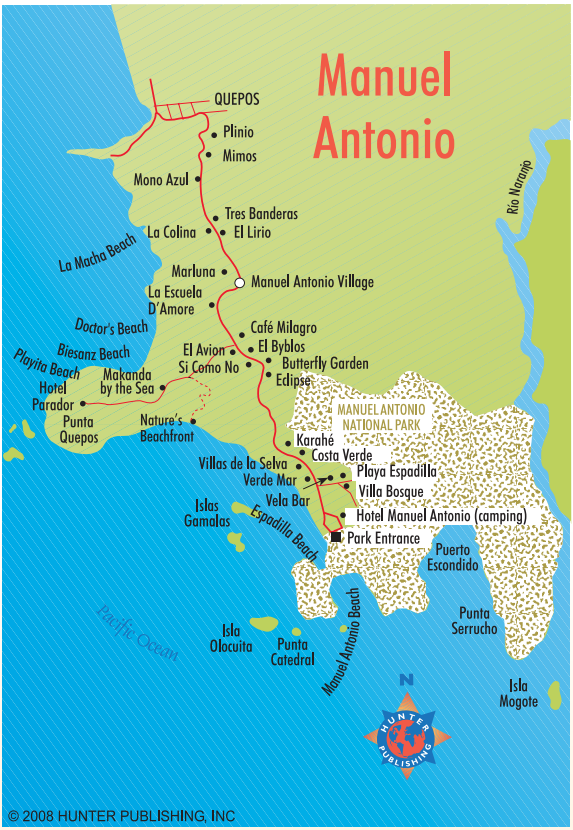
WEB: One of the more helpful local community websites is www.maqbeach.com.

◆ Manuel Antonio National Park

Once Manuel Antonio Park opened, tourists "discovered" the area's natural beauty – but they weren't the first. Ponce de Leon put this area on a map in 1519 while on his way to find the fountain of youth. Juan Vásquez de Coronado explored it in 1563 and encountered the Quepoa, an indigenous tribe of fishermen and divers who brought up unique pink pearls from local seas. Long dead from disease and warfare, all that remains of these people is their name.

DIRECTIONS

To get to Manuel from San José, follow the coastal highway through Jacó and continue south. By bus, take the direct express service



from Coca-Cola. By plane, jump on a 30-minute flight, offered by Nature Air (☎ *506/2220-3054)* or Sansa *(☎ 506/2221-9414)*, to the Quepos airport.

Apparently, you can't say you've visited Costa Rica unless you visit Manuel Antonio National Park *(www.manuelantoniopark.com)*, so it's no wonder the smallest national park in the country is also one of the most visited. There would be even more people within the park grounds if the Park Service hadn't enforced a limit of approximately 600 people per day (sometimes more on weekends). The area became a national park in 1972, just in time to prevent a large devel-

Manuel Antonio

oper from building a resort. At that time it had just 687 hectares (1,700 acres) surrounding a three-fingered spit of land that divides three bays. The park protects abundant wildlife – especially monkeys – and 350 types of birds, plus agoutis, sloths and large iguanas.

As you come down to the end of the road from Quepos, low-rent motels and eateries crowd the roadside. The beach on your right is Playa Espadilla, which gets crowded with sunbathing tourists. Be careful swimming here; the surf can be very rough. At the south end is a large rock formation and beyond that is the sand bar wash of a shallow estuary. It is across this narrow stream you need to wade to enter the park.

Playa Espadilla Norte

At high tide it can be waist deep, and at those times entrepreneurial locals offer crossings in their small boats. Walk quietly on the path after the park entrance; monkeys hang out in the shady trees overhead here and agoutis often forage for tender roots in the underbrush. The long beach on the right is Playa Espadilla Sur, a broad band of white sand lined with shade trees. Be aware of the manchineel tree, which grows prolifically in the Manuel Antonio beach areas.

MANCHINEEL MENACE

The manchineel has many branches, a short trunk and elliptical leaves with a bright green sheen. Found on many Caribbean islands and throughout Central and South America, the dangerous manchineel secretes an acidic poison irritant. Its fruit is said to be the original apple in the Garden of Eden and should not be eaten under any circumstances.

At the end of the beach, Punta Catedral (Cathedral Point) is the heavily-wooded rocky promontory that looks like an offshore island. And that's what it once was. Thousands of years of shifting sand and sediment formed a geological phenomenon known as a *tombolo*, the sandy finger that now connects it permanently to the mainland. A hiking trail runs around the *punta*.

The best beach in the park – perhaps, when it's not crowded, the best beach in all Costa Rica – is south-facing Playa Manuel Antonio, just past Punta Catedral. Gentle waves, celadon green water, soft sand, forest trees topped by flowering vines – this is paradise.

Hiking trails lead uphill from the beach; the one parallel to the shore connects with hidden beaches, the last of which is actually named "hidden beach," Playa Escondido. It's a strenuous hike to a completely un-crowded destination. Stop and listen to a cacophony of forest sounds on the trails.

Manuel Antonio was expanded by 600 to 700 hectares (1,482-1,729 acres) in 2001, making it nearly twice its original size by buying land around the Naranjo River. This "new" section is unpublicized, but it's accessible by trails (not well marked; ask a park ranger).

Unfortunately, the government failed to regulate much of the explosive growth *outside* of Manuel Antonio Park. In February 1992, Park Director José Antonio Salazar declared to the *Tico Times*, much to the embarrassment of the Park Service, "We have a park that's dying." According to the *Times*, the small park "cannot sustain a big enough population of tití monkeys to avoid inbreeding." One of many ecological concerns is that access of park-based monkey troops to other neighboring troops outside the park, is restricted by excessive construction and deforestation.

MONKEY SEE, MONKEY DO

Tití monkey (Boris23)

An alarming indicator of the degradation of the environment is the rapid decline in numbers of the tití monkey, also known as the squirrel monkey. This subspecies of monkey (*Saimiri oerstedi citrinellus*) is indigenous to the Manuel Antonio area, and a recent survey finds only 1,500 left of the subspecies and only about 4,000 of the entire species itself, down from 200,000 in 1983. The principal cause of local deaths is electrocution on the overhead wires along the road to the park.

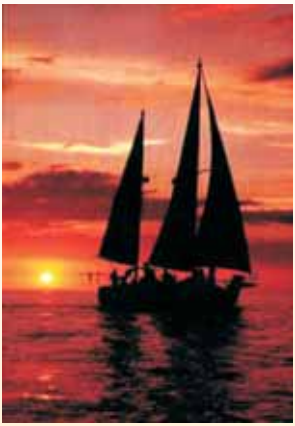
Kids Saving the Rainforest *(☎ 506/2777-2592, www.kidssavingtherainforest.org)* is a unique organization set up in 1999 by then 11-year-old Janine Andrews and her friend Aislin Livingstone at the Mono Azul Hotel. They collect funds to for rope bridges to be built for monkey crossings by selling local handicrafts, jewelry and other art items, plus signed copies of their book, *The Legend of the Blue Monkey*, written by Janine's mother and illustrated by Janine, Aislin and a friend Carrie Fedor. The simple, moral story for young children introduces Coco, a blue monkey, who rises above negative peer pressure and remains true to his beliefs. Janine's environmental efforts were featured in National Geographic for Children in 2002. See our review of the group's hotel, Mono Azul, on page 313.

An influential group of hotel owners have organized a program to insulate all of the wires in an attempt to protect the tití. Visit the Association for the Conservation of the Tití Monkey *(www.ascomoti.org)*.

The best time to see Manuel Antonio Park is early in the morning on a weekday before sun worshippers hit the sands. The best time of year to visit is during the rainy season; at other times, it can be crowded, especially on weekends. You may be subject to the occasional monsoon-like downpours – usually in the afternoon and evening – but they're wonderful to fall asleep by. The advantages of coming here at this time of year far outweigh the inconveniences: the vegetation is particularly lush, fewer people are present, prices are lower, and the park is at its most verdant. Entrance fee $6 for tourists. Closed Monday.

◆ Adventures on Water

There is more to do around Quepos than visit Manuel Antonio Park. You can rent surf and boogie boards at Playa Espadilla, just outside the park. Paddle a sea kayak or take a Zodiac trip to watch dolphins. Contact Iguana Tours *(☎ 506/2777-1262, www.iguanatours.com)*. One of their best trips is the three-hour excursion to Damas Island, a pristine habitat where caimans, boas, monkeys and hundreds of birds can be seen meandering in the mangrove canals. Another dolphin trip can be had with Planet Dolphin *(☎ 506/2777-1647, www.planetdolphin.com)*.



Sunset Sails *(☎ 506/2777-1304)* offers a sailing adventure with professional crew aboard a classic two-masted yacht, a romantic overnight special for honeymooners (or people who claim to be: nudge-nudge, wink-wink). Divers can go down with Costa Rica Adventure Divers *(US ☎ 866/466-5090, CR ☎ 506/2236-5637, www.costaricadiving.com),* who also have an operation and lodge in Drake Bay, on the Osa Peninsula.

For sport fishing, look to: Blue Fin Sportfishing *(☎ 506/2777-0674, www.bluefinsportfishing.com)*; High Tec Sportfishing *(☎ 506/2777-3465)*; or Sport Fishing Costa Rica

(☎ 506/2777-1060, www.costa ricabestfishing.com). Good seasonal information is available at www.fishcostarica.com.

Whitewater rafting in the area is on the Upper Savegre and Naranjo Rivers, both with Class III-IV rapids. A trip on the Upper Savegre takes a full day with Amigos del Río *(☎ 506/2777-0082).* Bewitching scenery mixed with exploding rapids. The Naranjo offers seven miles of challenging rapids only a half-hour from Quepos. A half-day tour runs between US $65 and US $100 per person.

◆ Adventures on Land

One of the most refreshing adventures around is with Canyoning Tours *(☎ 506/2777-1924, fattan@sol.racsa.co.cr)*, which features exciting descents of warm-water rainforest waterfalls, attached to a harness and rappel rope. This is a tremendous – and very active – adventure with an option of a rappel jump.

Take a high-wire tour with Rainmaker *(☎ 506/2777-3565, www.rainmakercostarica.com)*, which has a series of connected trails and suspension pedestrian bridges strung across a 607-hectare/1,500-acre virgin rainforest, part of the watershed area and biological corridor for Manuel Antonio. It has deep valleys and great views. Rainmaker's guided tours end at a swimming hole. The fee (about US $65) includes transportation and lunch.

Opposite Si Como No and next to El Byblos is the new, innovative Butterfly Garden run by the local nature guide cooperative. It also features trails and is preserving an undisturbed land corridor at the park's edge.

The Canopy Safari (☎ *506/2777-0100, www.canopysafari.com*) is a half-day zip line adventure, a fun trip into the jungle about an hour out of Quepos. Swimming and lunch are included for the fee of $65. For adventure touring with a hot twist, the rioSPAraiso *(☎ 506/8390-5865, www.gaialinktours.com)* trip to a biological reserve features a 45-minute (each way) horseback ride, canopy zip line rides, lunch and a dip in the hot springs (39°C/102°F). You'll see lots of birds and animals.

The release point for much of the rehabilitated wildlife in the area is Albergue El Silencio *(☎ 506/2290-8646, www.turismoruralcr.com)*, a community cooperative lodge next to a palm plantation in El Silencio, a town six km/3.7 miles inland and 35 km/20 miles south of Quepos. Green and red macaws released here have joined local flocks. See *Dominical* for accommodation details.

Canopy tour (CostaRica.com)

Equus Stables *(☎ 506/2777-0001, www.horsebacktour.com)* offers local horse tours with well-treated horses. Horseback riding at its best is at Brisas del Nara *(☎ 506/2779-1235, www.tourbrisasnara.com)*, 13 km/eight miles inland from Quepos in Londres. The family-run operation offers full- or half-day tours. Half-day trips include exploring the Río Naranjo's chasms, the Cerro Nara mountains, and several small waterfalls. The full-day trip (three hours total in the saddle) rides to an awesome 127-meter/418-foot waterfall and swimming hole, where they have dressing rooms and restrooms.

◆ Nightlife

Nightlife along the Manuel Antonio road is confined to the hotel bars and restaurants and the lower-rent places near the park entrance. The poolside bar at Si Como No attracts a more mature group, and the Barba Roja restaurant and bar is a very popular evening hangout. The casino and sports bar at El Byblos is in style – it even has billiard tables.

Costa Verde's impossible-to-miss roadside eatery La Cantina, gets big crowds, partly it offers live music and wood fires. Look for

Facing page: Rainmaker bridge near Quepos (Bruce & June Conord)

the train car perched along the road, opposite the Costa Verde Hotel.

Hard-core party animals head to Quepos' two discos and a bunch of happening bars for dance and romance possibilities. Unlike Manuel Antonio, which is spread out over a long distance, Quepos is perfect for bar-hopping. Mar y Blues, next to L'Aventura Multiboutique, is the place where you can get a real hot dog and a beer. Wacky Wanda's claims the cheapest food and drinks and the coolest air in town. The four-block area around here is home to most of Quepos' watering holes. The next block over, check out Banco Bar, a favorite of local ex-pats. Dos Locos restaurant gets a crowd for their live acoustic music every Wednesday and Friday night. There's a bit of open mike for musicians in waiting. The gambling casino is the Best Western Kamuk.

But the real nightlife in town is at Disco Iris. Disco Arco Iris is set in a grounded barge, approached across a gangplank, located just before the entrance to downtown. A small dance floor overflows with steamy dancers, and the music is a mix of Latin pop, salsa, reggae and rock.

> WARNING: The free-wheeling attitudes of Manuel Antonio and Quepos have attracted a few undesirables whose drug use and associated crime plague the area. Don't hesitate to go out anywhere in the evenings, but be aware of your surroundings and belongings and don't get so wasted as to be an easy target.

◆ Places to Stay & Eat

Quepos Town

The first place we recommend is not really in Quepos at all, but well before it, 15 km/9.3 miles up a bumpy gravel road from the village of Damas. The new Quepos Hot Springs *(☎ 770/831-9189, www.queposhotsprings.com,*

Porch at Quepos Hot Springs

On the trail to Quepos Hot Springs

$$) is a wilderness retreat that offers comfortable riverside lodge rooms with satellite TV, a bar and an excellent restaurant. The river and waterfall offer good fishing and trails into the woods promise wildlife sightings. The very hot (48°C, 120°F) springs are an hour away on horseback. Soaking in the mineral waters is alleged to be a health curative. Turn inland at the second street south of the soccer field in Damas (which is 10 km north of Quepos) and proceed through San Rafael de Cerros, then go over three creeks.

Back in Quepos, the traditional hotel is the Best Western Hotel Kamuk *(US ☎ 800/528-1234, CR ☎ 506/2777-0811, www.kamuk.co.cr, pool, restaurant, $$$, breakfast included)*, with large comfortable rooms facing the sea in the center of town. It is attractive inside, with a small pool, restaurant and casino. The rooms are reasonably priced.

Hotel Villa Romántica

More accommodations can be had at German-owned Hotel Villa Romántica *(☎ 506/2777-0037, www.villaromantica.com, pool, fan or air, breakfast included, $$)*, at the bottom of the hill before the hairpin turn for Manuel Antonio. Appealing, quiet hotel near Iguana Tours and Quepos Net Café.

HOTEL PRICE CHART	
Prices are per-night for two people, not including 16% tax	
$	$21-$40
$$	$41-$80
$$$	$81-$125
$$$$	$126-$200
$$$$$	over $200

A good value in town is the colonial-style, Cabinas El Cisne *(☎ 506/2777-0719, $)*, a typical Tico hotel on the corner near the road to the airport, one block north of the church. They offer clean simple rooms, with air or fans, shared kitchen, cable TV and private parking.

There are a growing number of new hostels around; our favorite is the inexpensive but classy, Wide Mouth Frog *(☎ 506/2777-2798, www.widemouthfrog.org, pool, air, $)*, a Kiwi/English-owned place near the soccer field and post office downtown. They offer an open-air kitchen and communal area in lovely gardens, a deep swimming pool, internet access, in-house laundry, plus a private room or dorm sleeping. Very nice folks and a pleasure to stay with. Say good'ay to Crispy and Maree.

At Wide Mouth Frog

For out-of-the-ordinary budget visitors there's Finca Amanecer *(Londres, ☎ 506/2779-1123, www.fincaamanecer.com, $)*, located on an organic spice farm, 10 km/six miles inland on the Naranjo River. By car, go past the airport and straight at the gas station. Welcome retreat for bird and nature lovers. From the Quepos station, take the Londres Abajo bus, specify "Finca Amancer." Taxis there are about US $10.

Quepos has numerous restaurants – many which double as bars. Eat local food cheap at Restaurante El Pueblo, a half-block north of Dos Locos, across from the Sansa office. It's our Tico food choice. Dos Locos is a gringo-happy institution that serves up savory Tex-Mex food at moderate prices. It's one block east of the Hotel Kamuk. It has live music twice a week and is a pleasant place to grab a window seat and relax. Across from the bus station.

The warm and friendly El Banco Bar also serves Tex-Mex food and cold beer in a former bank, but the most popular place in town is El Gran Escape Restaurant and Fish Head Bar. This place packs them in. If it's company you want, get it here, although food is less expensive almost everywhere else. Next door, the owner opened Tropical Sushi. Fresh fish in a sea port – what a concept. Our favorite bar food is a big hamburger at Wacky Wanda's, 50 meters/165 feet east of the bank.

Thankfully, you don't have to drive to the hotel zone to enjoy Café Milagro, the trendy coffee house that features excellent varieties of local coffee and grub. It's on the waterfront in the north end of town next to a hardware supply.

Manuel Antonio

Because it's a long road, hotels are in two locations: close to the beach at the end of the road, or up the hill, sometimes quite far from the park. Each has its advantage. The beach and park side hotels are generally smaller, cheaper and hotter. What you gain by staying on the mountain are ocean breezes, more greenery, a view of the sea and much more appealing accommodations – but at a higher cost. If you're thinking of staying during high season, make a reservation. It's best to book a couple of months in advance, especially over holidays such as Christmas and for long weekends.

HOTELS NEAR THE PARK

Closest to the park entrance is Hotel Manuel Antonio (in US ☎ *602/553-8178, in CR 506/2777-1351, www.hotelmanuelantonio.com, $$)*, a modern, two-story structure across from Espadilla Beach, at the very end of the road. Just before the turn-around, several shops, bars, and restaurants have opened at the corner. This area gets crowded with tourists who use the beach across the street instead of the park.

If you turn inland, up the road at this corner, you'll come to a series of quiet hotels in the woods. On the right is Cabinas Espadilla *(☎ 506/777-0416, www.espadilla.com, pool, air or fan, $$-$$$)* with clean rooms and gorgeous gardens.

Eat creative cooking in natural surroundings at the funky Vela Bar Restaurant, where the chef prepares daily dinner specials a notch above many pricier hotel restaurants. Few people realize the Vela Bar Hotel *(☎ 506/2777-0413, www.velabar.com, $-$$)* cabins in back can be an excellent budget choice. Several sizes and qualities

of rooms are priced accordingly. Best is the private one-bedroom house.

On the corner where the road turns to the park is Hotel Villa Bosque *(☎ 506/2777-0463, air, $$)*, a colonial-style two-story hotel with a big bar and restaurant, as well as an upstairs pool. Very pleasing public areas and rooms. If you want comfort and park proximity, this is a good choice. Hotel Playa Espadilla *(☎ 506/2777-0903, www.espadilla.com, air, tennis, pool, restaurant, $$-$$$)* sits across the street. This hotel is at the base of nine hectares/22.2 acres of rainforest of a private protected biological reserve, with hiking trails to overlooks. It's quiet and attractive, with kitchenettes and ice-cold air conditioning. Free-form pool, rancho restaurant. Turn toward the park where the Argentine steakhouse restaurant of Los Almendros *(☎ 506/2777-5137, $$)* faces the road. The steak house is a meat-lover's paradise, featuring chorizo and BBQ.

Hotel Villa Bosque

Hotel Playa Espadilla

UPHILL HOTELS

Dollar for dollar, Manuel Antonio has some of the most stunning boutique and small luxury hotels in all the Americas – and that's really saying something. Unfortunately, the price of the area's free natural beauty can comfortably slide into triple-digit nightly rates. However, when you compare location and amenities with prices for regular boring rooms in the US, Manuel Antonio's properties are bona fide bargains. We've stayed at many of them over the years

and found them well worth the splurge. But not all are so pricey as to make you miss out if you're on a budget, especially in the green season.

Costa Verde terrace

Costa Verde *(☎ 506/2777-0584, fax 2777-0560, www.costaverde.com, pool, restaurants, air, Internet, $$$-$$$$)*. The signature phrase of this renowned hotel is "Still more monkeys than people"–and it's accurate. Owner Allan Templeton, an ex-Peace Corps volunteer, is an environmental activist who built his property in a considered, responsible manner. Tall trees and forest on the hillside hotel property, which includes 74 hectares/30 acres left as a biological corridor, separate two, three-story buildings, each with an inviting cliff-side pool. Inside the ambiance is Spanish colonial with bright fabrics and teak wood grown on their own plantation. The best rooms are the top-floor suites, with kitchenettes, but even the lowest-priced standard rooms are worthwhile. Hillside bungalows with views have been added to the property. Please don't feed the monkeys that come at dusk. You can't miss Costa Verde: across the road from the entrance is their tile-roof, La Cantina BBQ restaurant (with live music) and Internet café in an old railroad car. Up the road apiece is El Avion, one of the

Costa Verde II suite

two C-123 cargo planes used to smuggle arms to the Contras in Nicaragua, now converted into a light meals eatery.

Hotel Verde Mar

Hotel Verde Mar *(☎ 506/2777-1805, fax 2777-1805, www.verdemar.com, pool, kitchenette, $$)*. With the Verde Mar, you don't have to sacrifice beach location for an appealing, affordable and comfortable hotel. This one, with its small pool, is only 50 meters/164 feet from Playa Espadilla beach. Built down from the road, the hotel's large rooms, with a pleasing Mexican décor, are in two-story, bright yellow buildings. Nice owner.

Villas de la Selva *(☎ 506/2777-1137, villasdelaselva@latinmail.com, 5 rooms, pool, air or fan parking, $$-$$$)*. You won't see a hotel along the sharp bend in the road below the Costa Verde, but you'll see a tiny office and sign for these quiet cliff-side accommodations. Steps lead to five picture-perfect rooms with balconies and dramatic views and a house that sleeps six (also for rent). Lovely pool. Steep walk to the beach.

Hotel Casitas Eclipse *(☎ 506/2777-0408, fax 2777-1738, www.casitaseclipse.org, 30 rooms and suites, cable, pools, restaurant, air, $$$)*. These magnificent, pure white Mediterranean-style villas are reminiscent of those along the Cote d'Azur. They are set along a steep garden hillside with views of the forest. The boldly designed buildings with drop-dead gorgeous rooms and three pools make the Eclipse one of Manuel Antonio's best looking hotels. Their El Gato Negro restaurant

Hotel Casitas Eclipse

is Italian gourmet. Bar Cockatoo above the restaurant is gay-friendly, as it the hotel.

Si Como No

Si Como No *(☎ 506/2777-0777, fax 2777-1093, www.sicomono.com, restaurants*, pools, air, jacuzzi, movie theater, breakfast included, $$$$). Si Como No, which means, "Yes, Why Not?" is a deservedly much admired, luxury hotel that emphasizes a balance with the ecology. New luxury villa houses stunning individual suites and three fabulous honeymoon penthouses. Impeccably clean with an engaging décor, the older hotel features pleasing standard rooms, and duplex *casitas* scattered along the hillside with second-floor views of the jungle and sea. The pool has a slide and swim-up bar. Dine at Rico Tico Grill, or the excellent Claro Que Sí restaurant. There's also a fabulous private movie theater with free shows for guests every night. Across the street, a Butterfly Garden and a private reserve are open to the public.

La Colina B&B *(☎ 506/2777-0231, fax 2777-1553, www.lacolina.com, restaurant, air, pool, breakfast included, $$)*. La Colina is a small hotel with the feel of an enjoyable bed and breakfast. They rent giant one-room flats, standard rooms with garden views, or six top-floor, ocean-view suites with balconies. Big breakfasts go along with the owners' concept of high-quality, affordable lodging. The stylish but homey décor is a welcome change, and the dual-level swimming pool is a real treat!

Hotel Las Tres Banderas *(☎ 506/2777-1871, fax 2777-1478, www.hoteltresbanderas.com, restaurant, bar, jacuzzi, pool, air, $$)*. Neat-as-a-pin rooms and suites are found in this colonial-style hotel up on the hill. Owned by a congenial American and a Pole (try an iced vodka at the bar), one of which is always available on premises. Meal plan.

Room at Makanda-by-the-Sea

Makanda–by-the-Sea *(☎ 506/2777-0442, fax 2777-1032, www.makanda.com, restaurant, pool, jacuzzi, in-room breakfast included, $$$$)*. If you imagine the perfect luxury honeymoon hotel with private contemporary studios and villas, enticing infinity pool, tropical flower gardens, and a romantic candlelit, poolside tent restaurant with billowing sheer drapes, then you've imagined Makanda. Polynesia transplanted to Costa Rica. Plus, you can walk off the sumptuous Sunspot Grill restaurant lunches and dinners on the steep steps between villas. Reservations suggested for both hotel and restaurant (open to the public).

El Byblos Hotel & Casino *(☎ 506/2777-0411, fax 2777-0009, restaurant, pool, billiards, casino, air, cable TV, $$$-$$$$)*. This unique local mainstay, one of the first in the area, offers big, exotic, recently remodeled bungalow suites set either side of a stream, or huge rooms in the main building. They are well appointed and beautifully decorated; you get a lot for your money here. Private and secluded, the property features a Tiki poolside restaurant that serves brick-oven pizza. The main building houses the international restaurant, casino and billiard hall, plus Billfish Bar. The charming French owner, Irene, who as a young woman was once denied entrance to the famous Byblos Hotel in St. Tropez, created a new Byblos of her own, where all people are made to feel welcome.

Hotel Plinio room

Hotel Plinio *(☎ 506/2777-0055, fax 2777-0558, www.hotelplinio.com, restaurant, pool, recreation room, $$)*. Hotel Plinio is one of

Manuel Antonio's most popular hotels with mid-range travelers. It's American owned and operated, with a 3.6-hectare/nine-acre private reserve above it and an observation tower on the mountaintop. The hotel itself is built up the steep hillside, so if you can't climb stairs, this one is not for you. The Italian international restaurant is a well-known spot for dinner.

Mango Moon B&B (☎ *506/2777-5323, www.mangomoon.net, pool, breakfast, air, cable, $$$$*) is an intimate and relaxed bed and breakfast perched aside a winding road, with a view of the sea. Gorgeous rooms are available, including one that's US standard handicap, but the best digs are in their one- and two-bedroom suites. Luxury and tranquility combine to make the Mango a fruitful vacation hotel. Located past the Mariposa but before the Makanda.

Mimo's Aparthotel *(☎ 506/2777-0054, fax 2777-2217, www.hotelmimos.com, cable, coffeemakers, air, pool, jacuzzi, $$)*. Italian-owned Mimo's is a lovely roadside inn that features three stories built into a garden. Junior suites boast kitchenettes, pretty tiled bathrooms and artistic touches all around. There's a deep rectangular pool and ranch-style restaurant. Best of all, they offer covered parking so your car isn't 160° when you get in it again. Motor scooter and bike rentals.

Mono Azul *(☎ 506/2777-2572, www.monoazul.com, pool, restaurant, breakfast included, $$).* The vivacious American owners, Jennifer and Chip, offer a variety of standard and deluxe rooms at reasonable prices. But our favorite digs here are across the street from their main hotel where they feature studios apartments up on the hill above the road behind the crafts shop. Environmentally active, Mono Azul is home to "Kids Saving the Rainforest" and their gift shop profits contribute to the cause. See dining below.

DINING

Most of Manuel Antonio's dining choices are in the various hotels, but Café Milagro *($)*, along the road, is a wonderful exception that should not be missed. It has excellent coffee blends, tasty *pan dulce* and cinnamon buns, sandwiches and breakfast. Visit their second location downtown.

DINING PRICE CHART	
Prices based on a typical entrée, per person, not including beverage.	
$	under $5
$$	$5 to $10
$$$	$11-$20
$$$$	over $20

The best restaurants for quality and ambiance are the Sunspot Grill *($$$$)* at Makanda-by-the-Sea and the less formal, Rico Tico Bar and Grill *($$)* at Si Como No. You can sit under the wing of Colonel Oliver North's cargo plane at El Avion (by Si Como No), or try La Cantina's Railroad Car, at Hotel Costa Verde.

The Barba Roja *($$)* happy hour is famous for its happiness, as is their restaurant. Hotel Plinio's *($$$)* place is a very popular spot, so is Karaola's *($$$)* for Mexican and seafood specialties. The poolside Tiki restaurant at El Byblos *($$)* is a sentimental and gastronomical favorite for pizza lunch, or the steaks in the main restaurant for dinner *($$$)*. Breezy La Terraza Restaurant *($$$)* offers views of the sea along with food of the sea at Villas El Parque. The Mono Azul *($$)* continues to get rave reviews from diners like us who stop for lunch or dinner. They do take out too. One of Manuel Antonio's more popular eateries is the funky Marluna. Their seafood specialties garner praise and the reasonable prices are an extra attraction; we go often.

Gay-Friendly Options

Manuel Antonio has attracted a fair number of gays and lesbians – both Ticos and foreigners – who live here full time, and the word is out that it's a good, tolerant destination for gay and lesbian tourists. Most hotels, bars and restaurants are gay-friendly with mixed crowds. Four hotels that are exclusively marketed to gays, lesbians and their families are the posh La Plantacíon *(☎ 506/2777-1332, www.bigrubys.com, pool, $$$$)*, older Casa Blanca *(☎ 506/2777-0253, www.hotelcasablanca.com, pool, $$$-$$$$)*, Kekoldi Beach Hotel *(☎ 506/2248-0804, www.purpleroofs.com/kekoldi-crca.html, $$$)* and the intimate Hotel Villa Roca *(☎ 506/2777-2335, www.villaroca.com, $$$)*. Gay backpackers with little money and no sense of décor can find a bed at the Swiss-owned Costa Linda, near the beach.

A good overview of gay friendly hotels throughout Central America can be found through www.purpleroofs.com.

LEAVING TOWN

To leave Quepos and head south, take the turn after the soccer field, then make a right and follow the road up the hill and out of town. You'll soon come to the airport and the graded but not fully paved Costanera Sur roadway. Oil palm plantations and sugar cane fields will accompany you along the coast, following the old railroad route.

Out of Town

Matapalo is the next beach, after about 25 km/15.5 miles of dust. This is a quiet, beach without end. Its strong surf attracts surfer dude pilgrims on an endless summer. There are several worthy places to stay along here. El Coquito del Pacifico *(☎ 506/2228-2228, www.elcoquito.com, pool, $$)* is a German-owned hotel that offers luxury cabin rooms and a gourmet restaurant. Farther north by a kilometer or so is La Piedra Buena *(no phone, $)*, five cabins with a gourmet Swiss restaurant. Great views from up on the hill are at the five El Castillo Guest House *(☎ 506/8392-3460, www.elcastillo.net, pool, $$-$$$).*

Dominical

Dominical

Forty km/25 miles south is the surfer village of Dominical, the beginning of the southern section of Costa Rica. It is the gateway for drivers heading to the Osa Peninsula; the road south is good from here. Or you can reach it via a four-hour drive from San José over the Talamanca mountains through San Isidro de General. If you're driving that way, try and time your mountain crossing for the mornings. Dominical's only gas station is two km/1.25 miles north of town near the Hacienda Barú (which happens to rent cabins; see below.)

Dominical gets strong winds off the Pacific; the coconut palms lining its "blue flag" beach are bent by its diligence. The pueblo and beach are near the mouth of the Río Barú, which, combined with the winds, makes a very strong and potentially dangerous surf. It's not suitable for swimming, and that's what attracts the surfers bent on riding its 10-foot waves. Learn to surf like the pros at the Green Iguana Surf Camp *(☎ 506/8825-1381, www.greeniguanasurfcamp.com).*

WARNING: When we say the surf is rough here, we mean rough. In 2001, 19 people drowned in the currents of Dominical beach. Finally, when a man drowned the day after his wedding, a lifeguard system was established. These heroic, but poorly paid, lifeguards saved 17 people during the first half of the high season of 2002. Never surf alone, but do contribute to the lifesaving service.

◆ Places to Stay & Eat

The place that put Dominical on the eco-tourism map is Hacienda Barú (see page 316), owned by dedicated conservationist, Jack Ewing, a fixture in the area since the 1970s. You'll find the hacienda about three km/1.8 miles north of Rio Barú. Dominical itself begins just south of the bridge. Turn right there to the new "Pueblo" shopping center and on your right is the very appealing Hotel Rio Lindo (☎ *506-787-0078, www.dominicalbiz.com, air or fan, lively restaurant, pool, $$*) with newly remodeled rooms. In the Pueblo center is an Internet café, pharmacy, soda and a Visitor Center (☎ *506/2772-5911, www.dominicalinfo.com*). Follow that dirt road around to the beach for the venerable DiuWak Hotel (☎ *506/2787-0087, www.diuwak.com, pool, $$*), the best-known accommodations in town. The rest of Domincal's services are beachside, among the trees. For good food and rental rooms, check out San Clemente Bar & Grill, a family Mexican restaurant, or nearby Thrusters, the meeting, eating and drinking place, *de rigueur* to all visitors.

About a kilometer south of town, the place to dance, drink or hang out on the weekend is Roca Verde *(☎ 506/2787-0036, www.rocaverde.net, 10 rooms, $$$)*, although service is spotty. For accommodations, we prefer Costa Paraíso Lodge *(☎ 506/2787-0025, www.costa-*

Costa Paraíso Lodge

paraiso.com, $$$), another kilometer south along the beach. The rocky shore has a safe swimming beach just down from the rooms in the beautiful villas, with separate bungalows above and a honeymoon cottage available. Peaceful.

For ecologically minded travelers, Finca Brian and Emilia *(cell 506/8396-6206, or book through CIPROTUR, $)* is a working fruit and nut farm owned by long-time resident Brian Trentham, up in the mountains above Dominicalito. A simple cottage holds up to four, and there is a wood-fired, 1,000-gallon hot tub. Brian is devoted to the land and his rustic *finca* sets a standard that all eco-tourism lodges should follow, with attentive staff, gourmet veggie meals and first-rate horseback and hiking tours. To get there, four km/2.5 miles south of Dominical, follow signs up the steep rugged road toward

Bella Vista Lodge balcony

Bella Vista Lodge *(US ☎ 877/268-2916, CR 506/8388-0155, www.bellavistalodge.com),* another pastoral mountaintop lodge with *bella vistas* from the same mountainside. Woody, the lodge owner, emphasizes a combination of comfort and adventure.

ADVANCE OR TAKE A CHANCE

For all of the more remote properties, we recommend a reservation, or at least calling in an advance, to ask about availability. If you don't book direct try CIPROTUR *(☎ 506/2771-6096, ciprotur@sol.racsa.co.cr)*, the regional official tourist information center or Selva Mar *(☎ 506/2771-4582, selvamar@racsa.co.cr)*, a booking agency. Both are in San Isidro.

Albergue El Silencio *(☎ 506/2290-8646, restaurant, www.turismoruralcr.com)*, is a community cooperative lodge next to a palm plantation in El Silencio, a town six km/3.7 miles inland and 10

Pacific Edge Cabin #2 & walkway to #3

km/seven miles north of Dominical. Ten rustic rooms with private bath. One of the more pleasing eco-retreat lodges is Pacific Edge *(☎ 506/2787-8010, www.pacificedge.info, $$)*, owned by a Brit and an America. It's located on a wooded mountaintop plateau above the whitewater surf of Dominicalito. Four bungalows feature rustic but comfortable rooms and a big front porch, with breathtaking views of the ocean and a wide hammock.

◆ Hacienda Baru

This private national wildlife refuge has cabins and organized tours. Hacienda Baru *(☎ 506/2787-0003, restaurant, www.haciendabaru.com)* comprises 324 hectares/800 acres of varied micro-eco-systems that includes over 81 hectares/200 acres of untouched old-growth forest plus some 300 acres of secondary forest. The mix attracts plenty of wildlife. Cute cabins with red roofs house overnighters in rustic accommodations near the beach. The refuge's owner, naturalist Jack Ewing, offers a myriad of trips, including a fabulous "Night in the Jungle" tour on horseback and foot. You'll find petroglyphs of the pre-Columbian Brunca and Boruca peoples that once lived here, and the hacienda's site yielded a rare, un-plundered Indian grave. Located about two km/1.25 miles north

of the Dominical bridge. The clean gas station there makes a good restroom stop.

◆ Nauyaca Waterfalls

Don Lulo's jungle waterfalls are well off the road between Dominical and San Isidro, two km/1.25 miles before the town of Platanillo. Adventurers leave their cars at the roadside office and ride horseback with guides through the rainforest to Lulo's house, where they eat a country breakfast. More winding trails lead to the two falls (one 50 meters/164 feet high) that cascade into a deep crystalline pool, perfect to dive in and swim. Dressing rooms available. After your refreshing morning, ride back to Lulo's for a typical Tico lunch. Make reservations direct *(☎ 506/2787-8013, www.cataratasnauyaca.com)* or contact a local hotel or tour agency. Cost is approximately US $45.

Uvita & Playa Ojocha (Playa Tortuga)

This little-visited area of the Pacific coast is only now opening up to tourism because of the newly improved road. Eventually it will be more developed when the road is discovered and made into a short-cut for Osa and the South, so see it now before it's gone. Beaches are long and deserted. This area is the home of one of Costa Rica's newest national treasures, Ballena National Marine Park, of which only 50 meters/164 feet of land is part of the park; the rest is underwater surrounding the largest Pacific Coast coral reef in the country ("*ballena*" is the Spanish word for "whale"). Past small islands offshore, hundreds of humpback and pilot whales migrate in the dry season. Year-round water residents include spotted dolphins that frolic in the bay.

◆ Places to Stay & Eat

The pride of Uvita – and perhaps of all Costa Rica – is La Cusinga Lodge (☎ *506/2770-2549, www.lacusingalodge.com, $$$*), located about 22 km/13.5 miles south of Dominical. The rustic lodge, with comfortable and pleasant wooden cabins, perches on a ledge of forest overlooking the Ballena National Marine Park. La Cusinga is an authentic eco-lodge and is frequently used by students and naturalists. It offers Modified American Plan service. Its edge-of-the-rainforest location doesn't make it difficult to get to, just hard to leave.

La Cusinga cabin

View from La Cusinga Lodge

If you're tired and hungry, try the Balcón de Uvita (*one km north of gasolinera, ☎ 506/2771-4582, pool, $$*), a lovely mountaintop restaurant and bungalow hotel with commanding views of the countryside. The cabins are warm and welcoming and the grounds are stunning. El Balcón is well known for its restaurant serving Thai and Indonesian cuisine, Thursday through Sunday. But if being close to the sea is paramount, then Steve Fisk's little hotel, Hotel Tucan *(in US ☎ 6115/469-0825, in CR 506/2743-8140, www.tucanhotel.com, restaurant, free WiFi, $*) near the village of Uvita itself, is a good choice. Its tropical gardens are beautiful and the rooms are cozy, if a bit basic. The Tucan is famous for its "Spaghetti Sunday" meals.

Up a dirt road from the highway, 16 km/10 miles south of Dominical, is Coco Tico (☎ *506/2743-8032*) a rustic but pleasant motel-style property, 500 meters/1,644 feet inland from the road. It's been owned since 1995 by English-speaking José "Chepe" Díaz and his friendly family. They offer an inexpensive meal package.

Camping allowed. About nine km/5.5 miles is south of La Cusinga is a notable luxury casita hotel, Villas Gaia (*Playa Tortuga, ☎ 506/2244-0316, www.villasgaia.com, pool, air, restaurant, $$*). Its 12 lovely, comfortable, colorful wooden casitas pepper the hillside gardens and jungle. An all-inclusive dining option is available.

Whales & Dolphins Ecolodge

Last, but not at all least, the inviting four-star eco-hotel, Whales & Dolphins Ecolodge (*Playa Hermosa, ☎ 506/2743-8150, www.whalesanddolphins.net, two pools, restaurant, air, $$$*) is 17 km/10.5 miles south of Dominical. This lodge, perched on the hillside overlooking the bay, is devoted to eco-tourism while pampering guests in a hotel-style comfort. Eco-activities include whale-watching, horseback riding, birding and mangrove kayak tours. Check out the fascinating whale tail-shaped beach.

Talamanca Mountains

The backbone of Costa Rica is the rugged majestic mountain range called Talamanca (Cordilla de Talamanca), which begins near Cartago and stretches down to the border with Panama. At the base of its western slopes is the Valle de El General, a long fertile valley that divides the mountains from the shore. The name, El General, refers to the valley's major river.

The Talamancas are not volcanic, but they are tall. One peak, Mount Chirripó, is the highest point in Costa Rica (3,820 meters/12,530 feet). The capital and largest city in the region is San Isidro de General, an agricultural center, 45 km/28 miles directly northeast (on a good road) of Dominical. To get to San Isidro and points south, the Inter-American Highway snakes along mountains, valleys and ridges from Cartago, eventually leading down into the valley. Between Cartago and San Isidro lies the dramatic section

known as the "Ridge of Death," *Cerro de la Muerte*. This is the high land of resplendent quetzals and the Tapantí-Macizo de la Muerte Cloud Forest, a national park. Ethereal. From San Isidro the Inter-American Highway continues to Palmar Sur, Ciudad Neily, and finally to Canoas, the border town with Panama.

◆ Along the Cerro de la Muerte

Oak forest in the Talamancas (jimfbleak)

The intimidating name, Ridge of Death, refers to a section of the Inter-American Highway that climbs across the Continental Divide near Mount Chirripó, Costa Rica's highest point. It's not called that because of its modern driving record – although its sharp curves, sudden fog and sheer drops on the side of the road have taken their toll – but because among the early settlers who made the difficult mountain crossing, several died from the cold en route. The nickname solidified during the building of the Inter-American Highway when a number of workmen met their maker.

We enjoy this drive every time we can fit it into our itinerary. It offers breathtaking views of the surrounding green mountains and deep valleys. As the altitude rises, the winds pick up and the temperature drops – noticeably. Above the tree line, the vegetation becomes windswept with heather, grasses, gorse and gnarled brush. Along the route are the Tapantí-Macizo de la Muerte Cloud Forest and several comfortable cloud forest lodges that specialize in finding quetzals (the bird of the gods) in the wild. The best drive begins in Dominical or San Isidro and heads north to Cartago. Dramatic!

SYMBIOTIC RELATIONS

The quetzal, which lives at altitudes between 5,000 and 10,000 feet, depends on the laurel tree, and the tree depends upon it for propagation.

Male quetzal

The area also offers a ton of chances to cast your line into private stocked trout ponds. For a small fee, the owners loan you tackle and you can catch your supper.

The caveat that applies to all major mountain crossings in Costa Rica is to make them in the mornings before clouds, fog, and rain obscure the view and make for white-knuckle driving.

On the way, at Km 56 of the Inter-American Highway, is Hamacas Y Souvenirs Café, which has a wide selection of handicrafts and loads of hammocks for sale.

At about Km 64 the Tapantí-Macizo de la Muerte National Park *(macizo@sol.racsa.co.cr)*, a combination of two parks, back to back. This high-mountain section is obviously the cloud forest, located on the east side of the highway. Down a short gravel road, the park entrance features dormitory accommodations and a big welcoming fireplace. A walk in the woods here is a real treat. Cold clouds sweep up and obscure the tall soaring trees, dripping with epiphytes and thick with moss.

◆ Places to Stay & Eat

HOTEL PRICE CHART	
Prices are per-night for two people, not including 16% tax	
$	$21-$40
$$	$41-$80
$$$	$81-$125
$$$$	$126-$200
$$$$$	over $200

These are listed in order heading south from Cartago. Down a steep side road around Km 58 of the highway is a turn for the town of Copey, at 7,000 feet, and the El Toucanet Lodge *(☎ 506/2541-3045, www.eltoucanet.com, including breakfast, $$)*. It's set in an area of apple, peach, plum and avocados orchards, above an oak forest and stream. There's a restaurant with fireplace and an open-air jacuzzi.

At Km 62 is the Albergue de Montaña Tapantí *(☎ 506/2232-0436, breakfast included, $$)*, a Swiss chalet-style lodge at 10,000 feet above sea level. The air outside is refreshingly brisk. This wonderful alpine hotel offers large, suite-like rooms with parquet wood floors and a big warm wood-burning stove in the lounge. The charming restaurant serves trout as its specialty. This is a popular birding lodge.

Albergue Mirador de Quetzales

At Km 70, the Albergue Mirador de Quetzales *(☎ 506/8381-8456, recajhi@sol.racsa.co.cr, restaurant, $$)* offers the best deal for rustic wood cabin accommodations on the side of a steep cloud forest hillside. Its low price includes breakfast, candlelight dinner (with homegrown trout to die for), and a 90-minute quetzal walk. Finca Eddie Serrano, next door, has 43 hectares/106 acres of forest with hiking trails and a waterfall.

See those big lumbering trucks you seem to follow going uphill and run ahead of going down? They all stop at Chespiritos (Km 78), a truck stop restaurant that serves "blue plate" *casados*, snacks, water and other travel items. Save your appetite for sweets until Km 93 and La Georgina, a bakery famous for its tasty pies and muffins.

At about Km 80 there's a turn downhill for San Gerardo de Dota, an unspoiled valley at 7,000 feet above sea level. It's a rough nine-km/5.6-mile four-wheel-drive road, but you're heading to year-round quetzal country. Trogon Lodge *(☎ 506/2740-1051, www.grupomawamba.com, $$)*, with hardwood cabins next to a cloud forest stream and hiking trails, also offers day or overnight trips to here from San José, including transportation. Guided hikes and horseback rides too. Along the river, stay at the Chacón family's Albergue de Montaña Río Savegre *(☎ 506/8390-5096, restaurant, $$)*, which has an excellent reputation for frequent quetzal sightings. Basic rooms, but with a warm and welcoming buffet dining area. Waterfalls, fishing, horseback riding.

Trogon Lodge

The view from Mirador Vista del Valle Restaurant & Cabins *(☎ 506/8384-4685, www.vistadelvallecr.com, $$)*, Km 119, is incredible. The little wooden restaurant and local artisan gift shop hang over the mountainside along the highway with breathtaking vistas of the valley below. They have hiking paths down into the forest and a couple of small rustic rooms for rent with over-the-edge balconies. You can make reservations for this and the other lodges through CIPROTUR *(☎ 506/2771-6096, cipro* tur@sol.racsa.co.cr).

San Isidro de General

The first cars to reach San Isidro, founded in 1897 at an altitude of 709 meters/2,332 feet above sea level, didn't come until 1945. Since then it has prospered with the surrounding agricultural boom in the Valle de General and, although still small, is an important hub and crossroads for the south. The bustling new *mercado* between Calle Central and Calle 2 is very attractive (the old market is now the Southern Regional Museum). San Isidro can be a central base for exploring the area, rafting the challenging Río El General and Coto Brus rivers, nipping down to the Pacific beaches, or hiking Mt. Chirripó. Non-city folk have other accommodation choices outside town in the mountains.

◆ Events

San Isidro has its fair share of unique events. The first week of February hosts the San Isidro de General Fair, with livestock shows, industrial expositions, bull teasing and an agricultural and flower exhibition. Around the same time is Fiesta de los Diablos, a Boruca Indian ceremony, in nearby Rey Curré. May 15th is San Isidro Labrador's Day, the Patron Saint of farmers and farm animals. The celebration brings parades and fairs into town. Also, a priest performs a blessing on all crops and animals.

◆ Adventure Tour Operators

San Isidro is the headquarters for the area's adventure tour operators in the area. The official regional tourist information and booking center is CIPROTUR *(☎ 506/2771-6096, www.ecotourism.co.cr)* on Calle 1, Av 1 and 3. They offer lots of information, in English, about the Brunca area, and can help make booking arrangements for guides and tours. In the same place is SEPA language school *(☎ 506/8866-9082, www.sabalolodge.com)*, and in Southern Costa Rica, it's totally a Spanish immersion. The school also offers courses combined with field programs in environmental education. Selva Mar Tours *(☎ 506/2771-4582, www.exploringcostarica.com)*, Av 4 near the Parque Central, books rooms for all the area's hotels and adventure tours.

David Mora's excellent Brunca Tours *(☎ 506/2771/3100, www.ecotourism.co.cr/rafting)*, headquartered in the Hotel del Sur, offers tremendous white water rafting trips and guided tours to the major southern attractions including Osa and Mt Chirripó.

One of the ecological gemstones of the area is FUDEBIOL (Foundation for Development of Las Quebradas Biological Center) a few kilometers from San Isidro. The 750-hectare/1,853-acre preserve was established to protect San Isidro's water supply on the banks of the Río Quebradas. Community-run, it offers wonderful hiking trails and a butterfly garden, picnic area and camping (US $6). Ask at CIPROTUR.

◆ Places to Stay & Eat

Hotel del Sur

Hotel del Sur *(☎ 506/2771-3033, fax 2771-0527, www.ecotourism.co.cr, pool, restaurant, air, $$)* is a spacious resort-style hotel that increasingly attracts tourists, with large rooms, an inviting figure-eight pool and good restaurant. South of town, about six km/3.7 miles on the left.

Downtown sister hotels, Hotel Iguazu and Nuevo Iguazu *(☎ 506/2771-2571 & 771-0076, www.ecotourism.co.cr, $)* are pleasant, plain hotels with clean and comfortable rooms. The Iguazu is in the city center, diagonally across from the McDonald's, while the New Iguazu is about eight blocks away in the Boston *barrio*, 200 m/660 feet southeast of the Unesco highway intersection. Rent a pleasing room in a small handicapped-accessible home from Monic Chabot *(☎ 506/2771-7482, chabote@racsa.cocr)*, who speaks English, French, and Spanish.

On the corner on Av 2 and Calle 2 is the upstairs La Cascada, an extremely popular modern bar and restaurant with balcony views of the street below. American rock and roll and two cable TVs attract a young crowd for *bocas* or a *plata fuerte* (full meal). Next to the cathedral facing the plaza is Delji, a winged design fast-food chicken shack – eat on picnic tables or take out. Colonel Sanders, eat your heart out.

For typical Tico food, the best place in town is Restaurant Chirripó, with an accompanying hotel behind. The old-fashioned eatery can be found on Av 2 facing the park. Next door is an Internet café, and on the corner is a good, inexpensive Soda. But what a pleasure to find authentic Mexican food at Mexico Lindo, a *taquería* (taco joint) 100 meters/329 feet south of the CIPROTUR and ICE (tourist) offices. Homemade guacamole and a range of Mexican specialties make this a required stop even if you're just driving through.

Café Delicias offers a wide range fo omelettes, pastries and coffee, or try Restaurante Primaveras, which delivers pizza *(☎ 506/2772/1975)*.

Chirripó National Park

Contiguous with Costa Rica's largest national park, Parque Internacional La Amistad, Chirripó National Park contains Mount Chirripó, Central America's tallest peak at 3,820 meters/12,530 feet. It became a park in 1975 – yet only 25,000 years before, glaciers covered this mighty mountain range, leaving carved, U-shaped valleys and clear-water lakes. Atmospheric conditions can vary greatly by altitude and change unpredictably. It can be very windy and cold – the lowest recorded temperature is -9EC (16EF). At mid-level the humid and cold cloud forest is characterized by tree-size ferns, moss, bromeliads, orchids, and towering (50-meter/164-foot) oak trees. At about 3,400 meters/11,152 feet, a tundra-like plateau, known as a *páramo*, begins. Chirripó means, "Land of the Eternal Lakes" in the indigenous language.

The best way to appreciate the park, other than turn the heater on in the car as you drive, is a two-day or longer hike to the summit. There is a new 60-person capacity, park-operated shelter, Crestones Lodge, six km/3.7 miles below the peak. Make reservations through the park office. Bring warm clothes, poncho and rain gear, food, plenty of water, dry clothes and a very good sleeping bag (you can rent blankets, sleeping bags and cook stoves at the lodge). Some tours operators will outfit you. Reaching the top does not require any climbing skills, and the hike in general is not super difficult, but the first day is especially strenuous (nine-12 hours).

Reservations to Climb

You must make reservations to climb the mountain, and pay your entrance fees and overnight charges (US $6 per night). Phone the Park Office three days in advance *(☎ 506/2771-5116)*, or call the Ranger Station *(☎ 506/2200-5348)* to make reservations. CIPROTUR can help with arrangements, and La Amistad Area Conservation Office in San Isidro *(☎ 506/2771-3155)* can make your reservations and accept payment. The most crowded time of year is mid-February, when the *Carrera a Chirripó*, a foot race to the summit, takes place. Other busy times are the school holidays in

December and *Semana Santa* (Easter Week). Make your start very early in the morning, as early as 5 am.

Access Routes, the Night Before

The most common entrance is from San Gerardo de Rivas, an engaging alpine village under an hour from San Isidro by car, an hour and a half by bus (which leaves San Isidro at 5 am and 2 pm). San

Albergue de la Montaña Pelícano

Gerardo is home to basic accommodations and an overnight here is recommended for an early start – try Albergue de la Montaña Pelícano *(☎ 506/2742-5050, www.hotelpelicano.net, all-wood rooms, restaurant, shared bath, eccentric "root" art gallery, $)*, or Albergue Vista del Cerro *(☎ 506/8373-3365, 4 rustic rooms including a "bed on a rock," camping, $)* . One of the more comfortable hotels is Río Chirripó Retreat *(☎ 506/2742-5109, www.riochirripo.com, $$)*, located between San Gerado and Canaan. It's a veggie, yoga, meditation retreat at the foot of the trail that leads up the mountain. Ommm. About 10 km/6.2 miles before San Gerardo, in the town of Rivas, is the Albergue de la Montaña Talari *(☎ 506/2771-0341, www.talari.co.cr, breakfast included, $$)*, a very pleasant riverside hotel. They'll pick you up for free in San Isidro with advance notice.

Río Chirripó Retreat

The closest lodge to the principal entrance to Chirripó is also the newest. The Urán Hotel *(US ☎ 609/695-8879, CR 506/8338-2333, www.hoteluran.com, restaurant)* has 21 rooms, eight of which have private bath and hot water showers.

GUIDING LIGHT

Another advantage of staying in San Gerardo or Rivas is the ability to arrange for local porters to haul your gear up to the lodge (US $ 35), either on horseback or their backs, while you schlep yourself up on winged feet. Although the trails are well marked and easy to follow, consider hiring a bilingual guide. Not only do they offer encouragement, but a good guide with knowledge of the ecology can add immensely to your experience. Ask CIPROTUR, or check with your hotel for guide recommendations.

Costa Rica Trekking *(☎ 506/2771-4582, www.chirripo.com)* has professional guides that run three organized treks in the Talamance Range, including one in Chirripó. This is an excellent hiking adventure operator.

Soak your cold bones (even if you haven't been to the mountaintop or seen the promised land) in a refreshing hot spring, one km/.6 miles down the road between San Gerardo and Herradura. From the roadside sign, it's a 10-minute hike to the misty warm spring pool.

Caribbean Coast

Among the many natural blessings bestowed upon Costa Rica, one of the most precious is the lush Caribbean coast, an area of great natural riches. A blanket of green covers the warm and welcoming land year-round. Costa Rica's east coast , known equally as Atlantic or Caribbean, is as diverse in itself as it is from the rest of Costa Rica. Beside a hot and humid tropical climate, flat and swampy terrain, the Caribbean coast is home to an Afro-Caribbean culture that speaks English. Black workers from Jamaica and outlying islands were imported to work building the Atlantic Railroad in the late 1800s, with many more coming to work the banana plantations in the early 1900s. Today, their blended culture is what gives this coastline the laid-back, easygoing tropical island atmosphere.

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There are two major overland routes to reach the area. One is the old route from San José through Cartago and Turrialba, down the mountain slopes to Siquirres, essentially paralleling the course of the mighty Reventazón River. It was replaced in convenience in 1978 by the Guápiles Highway, a more direct and less twisty road across a mountain pass in the Braulio Carrillo National Park that leads down to Guápiles.

The coastline also has two major sections: Tortuguero and Sarapiquí in the north (which has a Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí) and the more populated southern shoreline from Limón, through Cahuita, down to Puerto Viejo de Talamanca. Confusing the two Puerto Viejo's (de Sarapiquí with de Talamanca) would result in a very long drive. The more visited destinations in the south are

Cahuita and Puerto Viejo, towns so quintessentially Caribbean that they look and feel more like island villages.

Before we get to the Caribbean side, we need to cross the Continental Divide – the high mountain spine of Costa Rica. Two main routes overland, through Turrialba (see page 162) and the new road route (Guápiles Highway) through the Braulio Carrillo National Forest. *Vamos*!

Giant Leaf Frogs (HiM)

Braulio Carrillo National Park

Close to San José (only 20 minutes north), but a world away from city life, Braulio Carrillo National Park offers – if nothing else – spectacular views on a route to the Caribbean across the Continental Divide. When they first planned a highway to replace the twisty Turrialba route to the Atlantic side, forward-thinking environmentalists argued that a road through the mountainous area's primary rainforest would bring indiscriminate development (Costa Rica has an issue with squatters) and deforestation. In response, the government created a national park in 1978 on both sides of the road built to bridge the Continental Divide.

As dramatic as the stunning scenery is along the highway, the park's 47,582 hectares/117,528 acres go far beyond what you can see from the mountain passes. The park now encompasses Barva

Braulio Carrillo National Park
to Quesada
Secondary Roads
N
HUNTER PUBLISHING
Chilamate
Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí
126
LA SELVA
El Tigre
Magsasay
Puesto Magsasay
La Virgen
Río Porrosati
Río Montara
Río Sucio
Las Horquetas
Río Frío
Puesto San Ramon
San Miguel
Río Pico Azul
Río Sardinal
Río San Rafael
RARA AVIS
Río Puerto Viejo
Río Chimpó
Santa Clara
32
to Limón
Cacho Negro Volcano (2,150 m/7,072 ft)
Rainforest Aerial Tram
Vara Blanca
to Poás
120
Puesto Carrillo
Río Honduras
Río Sucio
Barva Volcano (2,906 m/8,834 ft)
Puesto Barva
Sacramento
Porrosati
126
Zurqui Tunnel
Bajo Hondura
32
Alto Palma
to Heredia
10 KM
15 MILES
to Heredia
to San José
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Patria Canyon (Eric Oehler)

Volcano and Cacho Negro Volcano (2,150 meters/7,072 feet), which descend into the Caribbean lowlands. The park stretches all the way up to La Selva near Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí. Its diverse ecosystem boasts over 6,000 species of plants, half the total of the entire country – our favorite is the giant "Poor Man's Umbrella," with leaves that *campesinos* use for cover when caught in the rain. Its avifauna includes more than 500 species of birds, both migratory and resident, plus hundreds of mammal and other wildlife species. Eighty-four percent of the forest is still primeval, making Braulio Carrillo National Park the largest contiguous tract of virgin forest left in the Central Valley.

Watch for the park's trademark, the rusty-colored Río Sucio (SUE-see-oh), which means "dirty" in Spanish. Under a bridge on the Caribbean side, two rivers (the Hondura and Sucio) merge in a rocky riverbed – the Sucio is a dirty orange color from sulfuric deposits leeching from underground near the Irazú Volcano.

Río Sucio (Tim Ross)

DRIVE RIGHT

Guápiles Highway is best traversed in the morning (true of all Costa Rica's mountain crossings) as fog and rain can make for white-knuckled driving in late afternoon and evening.

An hour's drive from San José, opposite Río Danta before Guápiles, is a turn for a dirt road, three km/1.8 miles in to Tropical Magic Forest, one of the closest canopy tours to the capital. A garden of delight can be found at Costa Flores *(☎ 506/2716-6430)*, one of Central America's largest wholesaler of tropical flowers. It's located about 15 km/nine miles east of Guápiles, just outside of Guacimo. Visitors can wander a beautifully landscaped path on the 360-acre farm that grows 600 varieties of precious heliconias. Food available. The $20 entrance fee includes a tropical flower bouquet.

Rara Avis Reserve

Abutting the eastern edge of Braulio Carrillo is the private Rara Avis Rainforest Lodge & Reserve *(☎ 506/2253-0844, www.rara-avis.com, $$)*, which pioneered sustainable eco-tourism in Costa Rica. Rara Avis, which means, rare bird, is a thriving venture founded in 1983 by Amos Bien, the former director of La Selva Biological Station, to prove eco-tourism, conservation and biological study could co-exist to the benefit of all three. A visit here requires an overnight stay, with advance reservations. Half the fun of visiting Rara Avis is getting to it. Meet the tractor cart at 8:30 am in Las Horquetas for your ride into the rainforest (no cars allowed). It takes three-plus hours of back-breaking bumps and grinds in an eco-version of a Marquis de Sade hayride. Horseback trips in can also be arranged with the preserve.

Guided nature walks are offered free of charge and birders will be pleased to hear that 362 species have been recorded here. Another blessing of the surrounding rainforest is the cacophony of nighttime sounds. The tremendous Catarata Rara Avis, a twin-level waterfall with an enjoyable swimming hole underneath, is the highlight attraction.

Rara Avis offers a real-world learning experience in sustainability and rainforest conservation. They have a butterfly farm and rope climbing apparatus for scaling into the canopy. At 700 meters/2,303

feet the climate stays cool (25°C, 77°F), but it rains a lot. For some reason, mosquitoes are not a problem. This is a trying journey with agreeable rustic lodgings and is best suited to the physically fit. Because of the difficulty of access to Rara Avis, we recommend a minimum two-night stay. *(☎ 506/2764-1111 or fax 2764-1114, or book on-line at www.rara-avis.com.)*

If rustic is not for you, an appealing luxury resort outside of Horquetas is Sueño Azul *(☎ 506/2764-1000, www.suenoazulresort.com, pool, restaurant, pool, $$$)*, that features 25 well-appointed rooms (with terraces) built on the site of a century-old hacienda. It has a spa and offers yoga. Tours and private reserve over a narrow metal bridge built for oxcarts.

La Selva & Sarapiquí

La Selva Biological Station *(US ☎ 919/684-5774, CR 506/2524-0607, fax 2524-5661, www.ots.ac.cr, dining hall, gift shop, $$)*, three km/1.8 miles south of Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí, is famous throughout educational, scientific and tourist circles. It is primarily a research facility run by the Organization for Tropical Studies (OTS), situated near the confluence of the Sarapiquí and Puerto Viejo rivers. OTS is a not-for-profit consortium of more than 55 universities in the United States, Latin America and Australia. They also operate Las Cruces and Palo Verde. Limited accommodations are available.

Holbrook Travel (see *Selva Verde Lodge* below) is the regional expert for this part of Costa Rica.

◆ Adventures

On the Río Sarapiquí (www.wholetravel.com)

La Selva's Sarapiquí Rainforest shares a border with Braulio Carrillo National Park, effectively enlarging it by 1,516 hectares (3,746 acres), for a total UNESCO biosphere of 49,000 hectares (121,000 acres). Since the 1950s the researchers at OTS have identified key

organisms in the complex rainforest biological process. You get to share in the wonder by exploring part of the 57 km (35 miles) of well-maintained trails looking for peccaries, agoutis, sloths, howler monkeys, spider monkeys, mandible or keel-billed toucans, white-crowned parrots, red and blue poison dart frogs, orchids, philodendron or any of the 100 species of trees in the old-growth forest. And, if you're staying overnight, chow down with scientists and students who talk shop over the communal dining table in the evening. No sandals allowed due to the risk of snake bites.

Oasis Nature Tours *(☎ 506/2766-6108, www.oasisnaturetours.com)* is a Puerto Viejo nature tour agency running trips on the Sarapiquí and San Juan rivers, plus Tortuguero canals. Half- and full-day excursions, plus you get a Nicaraguan passport stamp on the San Juan trip.

A few kilometers south of town in El Tigre you'll find a cooperative of local women, known as MUSA, who run a medicinal herb farm. They sell health products made from their own harvests.

Just down the road from the Selva Verde Lodge (see below) is the Sarapiquí Learning Center *(☎ 506/2766-6482, www.learningcentercostarica.org)*, where local community members, activists and visitors sit down for an afternoon coffee break, called a *charla*, or "chat." A plate of goodies, some good Costa Rican coffee and a bilingual sharing of culture. They also teach Latin dance plus arts and crafts.

Two nature films were produced by the BBC on the "Hummingbird Hotel" and "Weird Nature" at Heliconia Island *(☎ 506/2764-5220, www.heliconiaisland.com),* located between Las Horquetas and Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí. Former graphic artist and New Yorker, Tim Ryan, created a marvelous living botanical garden of flowers (70 varieites of heliconia) and indigenous plants that attracts flocks of birds, butterflies, and hummingbirds to his two-hectare/five-acre island. He offers day and night tours. Entrance fee is US 15, tasty meals are offered in a riverside Japanese restaurant. Located outside Puerto Viejo.

The longest suspension bridge in Costa Rica (262 meters/862 feet) spans the great Río Sarapiquí from Tirimbina to the Sarapiquís Centro-Neotropic *(☎ 506/2761-1004, www.sarapiquis.org, $$-$$$),* an archeological/ecological project managed by a Belgian foundation. Sarapiquís is an eco-model of a 15th-century pre-Columbian village designed using ecologically sustainable technologies. It's an innovative concept in eco-tourism for Costa Rica, a country not known for its pre-Colombian archeol-

Sarapiquís Centro-Neotropic

ogy. The architecture, inspired by the indigenous building style of the early peoples, features four huge palenques, built with cone-shaped roofs made of thatched palm. A cultural museum boasts a film theater. Visitors can explore the gardens and ongoing archeological dig, where stone formations and four large tombs, dating from 800-1550 A.D., are being excavated.

In 1995, the Milwaukee Public Museum and Wisconsin's Nature Center opened the 304-hectare/750-acre Tirimbina Rainforest Center *(☎ 506/2761-1579, www.tirimbina.org),* to preserve endangered tropical forests and ecosystems, two km/1.25 miles north of La Virgen. The area was selectively logged in the 1960s and is an example of rainforest regeneration now serving as an active research and study destination for school groups, teacher training and scientific research projects.

Early indigenous carving

Find another uncommon tourist experience at Rancho Leona *(☎ 506/2761-0048, www.rancholeona.com, restaurant),* a relaxed retreat in La Virgen, on the edge of the Sarapiquí river. It's a creative atmosphere and participants can stay overnight in their lodge, take tours, kayak trips or study Spanish in a supportive environment. The artist-owners also offer guests a sweat lodge and spa service.

◆ Places to Stay

In Chilamate, Selva Verde Lodge *(US & Canada ☎ 800/451-7111; CR ☎ 506/2766-6800, www.holbrooktravel.com, $$)* is a popular

Selva Verde Lodge

forest lodge close to, but not affiliated with, La Selva biological station. Giovanna and Juan Holbrook, of Holbrook Travel in Miami, built this large lodge in 1985 as a way to save 202 hectares/500 acres of secondary rainforest. Located on the banks of the Río Sarapiquí, Selva Verde offers above-ground newly-renovated, air-conditioned bungalow rooms connected by covered walkways to the 45-room main lodge, restaurant and bar. It's a friendly and comfortable place to use as a local base. They offer eco-tours and a super friendly atmosphere. Holbrook Travel is an excellent agency that can make all your Costa Rica travel arrangements for you.

Good food and comfortable accommodations can be found at the popular, family-run La Quinta de Sarapiquí *(☎ 506/2761-1052, fax 2761-1395 www.laquintasarapiqui.com, restaurant, pool, $$)* along the Río Sardinal. This charming country inn hosts a local natural history display within a large art gallery that features local artists and handicrafts. And for living specimens, it's a good place to find the tiny poison dart frog (*Dendrobates pumilio*) in their "frog garden." You'll get personal attention from Beatriz Gámez and her hus-

La Quinta de Sarapiquí

Hotel El Bambú

band Leo. Good people. Great place to stay.

If you're taking the river boat trips or just floating around, a quality inn in the center of Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí is Hotel El Bambú (*☎ 506/2766-6005, www.elbambu.com, pool, restaurant, $$*), a large and agreeable hotel with a big kidney-shaped pool and good restaurant.

Tortuguero National Park

Tortuguero National Park

The fertile Atlantic slope drains into the Caribbean Sea at Costa Rica's remote northeastern border with Nicaragua, along the San Juan River. Here, the Barra del Colorado Wildlife Refuge and the 20,000-hectare/49,400-acre Tortuguero National Park, do their bit to protect their famous network of canals, tributaries and the vast green, alluvial plain.

Dark brown waters in the 160 km/99 miles of inland canals criss-cross untamed, low-lying forests and mangrove swamps of the northeast region, allowing traditional means (motor boats) of transportation between tiny villages and plantations. The Amazon-like

canals provide a window on the environment and are a wonderful way to see birds, monkeys and other wildlife. Of the 16 endangered mammals in Costa Rica, 13 of them are found in the parks or nearby. The 405 bird species recorded here, dwarf the number found in the entire European continent.

BIGGER IS BETTER

Tortuguero is the only Costa Rica Park that has never been increased in size. Write a letter to the Costa Rica government and complain!

But it is sea turtles that everyone comes to see. No matter how far they roam, turtles, like children, invariably come back to nest on the same beach where they born. Four of the world's eight turtle species nest at Tortuguero (tor-two-GERO) at various times of the year. The largest, leatherbacks, nest in March and April and hatch May through June. Far more common are green turtles, who nest July through September – the best time to visit. Turtles lay their eggs at night and are easily disrupted, so the 100 people maximum allowed on the protected beach must be with a guide who uses a dimmed flashlight and stealth to get his or her group close to the mother turtle without disturbing her. Visitors can spend overnights in one of a handful of quality jungle lodges or the few *cabinas* available in the little village.

Touring Tortuguero National Park

You can fly in and out of Tortuguero but, unless you're in hurry to have life pass you by, take the slow boat tour and stay one or two nights. Fly back if you want. Seeing turtles

nest at Tortuguero is a total eco-experience and one you'll talk of for many years.

THE TURTLE'S TALE

Green sea turtle (PiccoloNamek)

In the early 1950s, Dr. Archie Carr, a zoology professor from the University of Florida, found that the 40-km/25 miles of black sand south of Barra del Colorado was a globally important nesting sight for green turtles. He established a research station near Tortuguero (derived from the Spanish for turtle, *tortuga*) – even as locals continued to harvest the turtles and their eggs. Dr. Carr published a fascinating chronicle of his expeditions in 1956, entitled, *The Windward Road*. The book so touched Joshua Powers, a NY publisher's repre- sentative, that he and 20 others, lead by John Phipps, formed the Caribbean Conservation Corporation *(www.cccturtle.org, ☎ 800/678-7853)* in 1959. Their mission is to ensure the survival of sea turtles within the wide Caribbean basin. At the edge of the village CCC operates H. Clay Frick Natural History Visitor Center to educate and inform the 40,000 people who visit annually. Since its inception, CCC's efforts very likely saved the green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) from immediate extinction and were instrumental in the creation of Tortuguero Park in 1970.

◆ The Way Here

Tortuguero should be an overnight adventure. Book a tour with a travel agency in San José or directly with one of the good lodges mentioned below. You can fly in and out, but that sort of defeats the purpose. Tour vans take you from San José, through the banana plantations around Batán (no marching required) or Moín, near Limón, to the docks. Canopied launches then carry you 3½ hours up river to the park. Infrequently, tours take the old long cut from Muelle, north of Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí. This route, via the San Juan River, gets your passport stamped in Nicaragua. In 2006, the border dispute between Costa Rica and Nicaragua, over rights on the San Juan River, flared up again disrupting river traffic there.

A fast boat, the Riverboat *Francesca*, owned by Fran and Modesto Watson *(☎ 506/2226-0986, www.tortuguerocanals.com)*, offers lodge overnights and/or carries passengers daily from the Moín dock. A one-day, one-night package with meals and round-trip transportation on their riverboat runs about US $185.

THE LEGEND OF TORTUGUERO

An indigenous legend explains why turtles always come back to mate and nest at the same beach where they were born. The native peoples believe a carved image of a turtle, located in a cave in Tortuguero Mountain, a 117-meter/385-foot hill rising above the tree line at the north end of the park, directs them. The turtle statue swivels toward the land when it it time to come in and nest, and turns 180° to the sea when it is time to head away. Not surprisingly, there is a cave in the hill, but an earthquake collapsed its entrance and only bats know what is inside. This hill makes a fun morning hike for its views of the forests and seashore.

◆ Places to Stay

Tortuguero village itself is located on a narrow sandy peninsula of land hard against the ocean's rough surf and the placid main canal. On either side of the canal are jungle lodges that specialize in multi-day package tours. Guests in lodges on the sandy side have the advantage of being able to walk to the village and beach without crossing the canal by launch. The inland hotels are cooler and feature forest hiking trails. All lodges offer all-inclusive packages that in-

clude round-trip transportation, all meals, a tour and one or two night's accommodations. Prices listed are for double occupancy, per person, unless otherwise noted – multi night packages also available.

The new Pachira Lodge *(☎ 506/2223-1682, www.pachira-lodge.com)* has an elegant, Caribbean-casual buffet dining room and attractive bedrooms in bungalows built on pilings above the jungle floor. The rooms connect by covered walkways and the beautiful pool is heart-shaped. Canal side. They offer a boat and plane combo, two nights, for around US $260 per person. One night and boat transfers runs US $ 180. They also feature a one-day trip (12 hours) from San José for approximately US $100.

Pachira Lodge

Tortuga Lodge *(☎ 506/2272-4943, www.costaricaexpeditions.com)* is a canal-side hotel owned by the experienced Costa Rica Expeditions, and it sets the standard for service and luxury in Tortuguero. There's excellent dining, family style, in a new canal-side restaurant and a new pool uses a non-chemical purification system. Desirable rooms in two-story buildings with verandas upstairs (preferred). Around US $300 for one night, plane and water transfer combo (less if by boat both ways).

Pachira Lodge

On the ocean side is the smaller Laguna Lodge *(☎ 506/2272-4943, fax 2272-4927, www.lagunatortuguero.com),* which offers rooms built of old almond wood. From here you can walk to town.

Their free-form pool is inviting, as is an edge-of-the-canal, thatched-roof dining room. Booking through Riverboat Francesca can be a bit cheaper. Packages run US $200, with student discounts offered.

Mawamba Lodge *(☎/fax 506/2293-8181, www.grupomawamba.com)*. For US $ 210 you get two days, one night, water transportation and all meals at this oceanside lodge. They also have a free-form pool, jacuzzi, two family-style restaurants, and game room. Verandas have rocking chairs and hammocks.

Hotel Ilan-Ilan

Another canal-side lodge is Hotel Ilan-Ilan *(☎ 506/2296-7378, fax 2296-7372, www.ilan-ilanlodge.com),* a series of very rustic Caribbean *cabina* rooms. This was our first hotel stay, back when it opened in 1989. Packages run US $160 for one night. Our most recent stay was at the Jungle Lodge *(☎ 506/2233-1200, fax 2223-1332*, the area's largest lodge, with a large pool featuring "waterfall" circulation, bar and dance floor, and a good restaurant. It has basic rooms. Rates run around US$ 200 for a one-night package.

In town, ask locals for directions to the Cabinas Aracari *(no phone, $)*, near the soccer field, or Cabinas Miss Junie *(no phone, $)*, the best of the *cabinas*, owned by the former cook for the CCC research station. The famous "Miss Junie" turtle was named after her. Located at the north end of the village.

Barra Colorado & Parismina

These two locations, Barra Colorado, near the Nicaraguan border at the mouth of the Colorado River, north of Tortuguero, and Parismina, a small fishing village south of Tortuguero, offer high-priced, exclusive deep-sea fishing lodges and depressed little towns.

◆ Deep-Sea Adventures

Tarpon and snook are the big fish, but deep-sea catches include barracuda, jack, tuna, dorado, sailfish and marlin. Silver King Lodge *(US ☎ 800/682-7766, CR 506/8381-1403, www.silverkinglodge.com)* has an excellent reputation and is the most luxurious. The venerable Río Colorado Lodge *(US ☎ 800/243-9777, CR 506/2232-4063, www.riocoloradolodge.com)* offers a air-conditioned rooms. Samay Lagoon Lodge *(☎ 506/8384-7047, www.samay.com)* claims to catch as many fish. Bring a bunch of buddies and rent Dr. Alfredo Lopez's 65-foot *Rain Goddess (US ☎ 866/593-3168, CR 506/2231-4299, www.bluwing.com)* a houseboat with crew for tours, fishing or relaxing.

Samay Lagoon Lodge

◆ Parismina

The well-known Río Parismina Lodge *(US ☎ 800/338-5688, CR 506/2229-7597, www.riop.com, $$$$)* caters to fishermen and has all the amenities, including beautiful garden grounds. Jungle Tarpon Lodge *(US ☎ 800/544-2261, www.jungletarpon.com)* offers fishing and adventure packages, as does Caribbean Expedition Lodge *(US ☎ 888/341-5525, www.costaricasportfishing.com)* at the mouth of the Río Parsimina.

Río Parismina Lodge

◆ Nicaragua

The meandering San Juan River, the occasionally tense border between Nicaragua and Costa Rica, has played more than a minor role in history. During the California Gold Rush, Cornelius Vanderbilt used the river, in combination with a overland railroad, to transport thousands of men and tons of gold on the 42-day journey back and forth between New York and San Francisco. It was this economic interest that put him squarely up against the 19th-century carpetbagger, William Walker (see page 63). Vanderbilt used huge dredges in the bay to gather sand for railroad beds in low-lying areas. One of these gigantic rusting pieces of machinery is still visible in the shallows of the river mouth from a new $2.1 million dollar sportfishing and eco-tourism resort, Río Indio Lodge *(http://rioindiolodge.com, US ☎ 866/593-3176, CR 506/2296-3338, $$$$$)*. It's a premier eco-lodge and a major effort on the part of Nicaragua to imitate Costa Rica's success in attracting eco-tourists. The lodge is a deep-sea fishing destination as well as a base for eco-tours of Nicaragua's virtually unexplored Río Indio-Maiz Biological Reserve. The swampy wilderness encompasses 640,000 acres of the largest lowland tropical rainforest in Central America. Vanderbilt's abandoned railroad beds now function as trails for diverse wildlife and intrepid hikers. If eco-tourism catches on, Nicaragua may be the next Costa Rica.

Puerto Limón

Puerto Limón

Sadly, Puerto Limón (lee-MON) city has little to offer tourists, especially eco-tourists. That is, except for Carnaval – an early-October, week-long celebration that attracts party animals, cultural aficionados, Ticos, tourists, backpackers, musicians, dancers, students, locals and hippies

1. Former train station
2. Soccer stadium
3. Baseball stadium
4. Taxi stand
5. Hotel Miami
6. Post Office/ Museum
7. Market
8. Hotel Acón
9. San José bus stop
10. Parque Vargas
11. Hotel Park
12. Sixaola bus stop/ via Cahuita, Puerto Vieja
13. Moín
14. Hotel Internacional
15. Gas station
16. Hospital

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among the over 100,000 people that pack the city streets. In the middle of it all is Dia de las Culturas, a time to celebrate the mixed culture of Costa Rica. It's a wild, totally Caribbean Mardi Gras – set to the rhythm of an Afro-Caribbean beat. The rest of the year Limón is a working port.

Established where Columbus first anchored offshore in 1502, Limón has proved over the years to be the premium deep-sea harbor for Costa Rica exports. Fortunately, new revenue from cruise ship passengers is beginning to spur renovations to make the town more interesting to travelers.

◆ Sights & Adventures

The reintroduction of the Jungle Train, or at least the Limón to Siquirres section of the old run, may be worth a ride through the banana plantations. Transportation from San José for a day-trip is offered. Contact a local travel agent for arrangements. A full-day tour, including lunch, is about US $80.

To explore the historic old seaside city can be a satisfying experience. We especially enjoy people-watching from under royal palm trees in Parque Vargas, or strolling the long seawall. We admired the slowly disintegrating but charming century-old wooden buildings downtown, and then wandered around in the refurbished Mercado Central, filled with fruits and vegetables, fish and hard goods. Another spot that piqued our curiosity was the graveyard on the way into town. What had caught our eye was the large Chinese burial section, complete with oriental designed graves, on a hillside under tall pine trees.

Horseback riding in the tropical forests is as close as La Bomba, a town on one of the roads south from Limón to Cahuita. Ranch Cedar Valley (☎ *506/8847-1796, www.bluelimbo.com)* offers very interesting individually guided forest rides.

TEREMOTO

Limón has always been poor, but the entire province got quite a financial jolt at 4 pm, 22 April 1991, when a powerful earthquake, or *teremoto*, destroyed the Atlantic Railroad, many buildings and cut roadway and communications with the Central Valley. The epicenter that destroyed nearly 3,000 homes was inland and west of Cahuita. North of Limón, the ground rose or sank in some places as much as two meters/6.6 feet.

◆ Places to Stay & Eat

HOTEL PRICE CHART	
Prices are per-night for two people, not including 16% tax	
$	$21-$40
$$	$41-$80
$$$	$81-$125
$$$$	$126-$200
$$$$$	over $200

Downtown has many small sodas featuring Caribbean cooking and seafood, but the coolest place in town to eat is El Faro Restaurante *(☎ 506/2758-4020, $-$$)*, high on a hill above the city. It serves an international menu on a terrace with a view of Isla Uvita. Located above the cemetery; turn uphill by the railroad tracks west of the cemetery. Near the college of Limón and technical school. Restaurante Placeres *($-$$)* is a fine choice, 25 meters/82 feet east of the entrance to Emaus, on the road to Portete, just north of the city.

If you want a room for Carnaval, book months in advance. In Limón City, the venerable Hotel Park *(☎ 506/2798-0555, Av 3, Calle 1 & 2, 2½ blocks east of the mercado, $)* has a clean standards with air conditioning and cable TV.

Better accommodations are found north of town in Moín or Portere. Hotel Maribú Caribe *(☎ 506/2795-4010, maribu@racsa.co.cr, pool, $$$)*, at Playa Bonita, offers nice, air-conditioned rooms in circular thatched-roof bungalows on a promontory cliff above the surf. The breezy terrace restaurant offers a great view of the rocks and intimate white sand beach between outcroppings below. Less than a kilometer away is the green Hotel Matama *(☎ 506/2758-1123, pool, $$$)*, with gorgeous garden grounds, air-conditioned rooms, a pool, bar and restaurant. Across the street is the beach and Apartotel Cocorí *(☎ 506/2798-1670, fans, $$)*, which has a relaxing open-air restaurant and small rooms.

DINING PRICE CHART	
Prices based on a typical entrée, per person, not including beverage.	
$	under $5
$$	$5 to $10
$$$	$11-$20
$$$$	over $20

Cahuita

Cahuita beach (goBackpacking.com)

Cahuita (pronounced cow-EAT-ah) town is an increasingly desirable destination to all kinds of tourists. It's best known for the beautiful oatmeal sand beaches in Cahuita National Park – set aside in 1978 to protect the shoreline. The town offers laid-back luxury hotels and backpacker hostels, near the beaches or deep in the inland rainforests – all at generally at lower prices than Pacific coast destinations. Surfers, bohemians and adventurers share the streets here with eco-tourists. Come soon and stay long.

DID YOU KNOW? The park's wetland flora, dominated by yolillo palms and sangrillo trees, gave the town and park its name, derived from the indigenous language. "Kawa" means sangrillo tree, and "ta" means point, which became known as Cahuita.

Cahuita (goBackpacking.com)

About 45 km/28 miles south of Limón, along a coastal road that passes forests and banana plantations, Cahuita's beach-bum small town is set off the road to the left. The sandy streets have many more bicycles and pedestrians in shorts than cars. It's

a town of loping dogs and blond surfers, black-skinned fishermen kicking a soccer ball and visitors bent under big backpacks, small shops and sodas, B&Bs and restaurants. Hotels can be found in town or north of the village along a dirt road that follows the shoreline. The park is at the southern town limit, across a wooden pedestrian bridge. If you're day-tripping, surfing or swimming, enter here. If you're coming to camp or snorkel, enter at the south end of the park, Puerto Vargas, the official entrance about seven km/4.4 miles south of town.

◆ Adventures

The best swimming is on Playa Negra, a black, volcanic sand beach beginning past the north end of town, with the softest sand farther on. You can get all kinds of services at locally owned, friendly Mister Big J's *(☎ 506/2755-0328)*. Laundry, surfboards and snorkel rentals, maps, books, trips to Tortuguero, horseback riding, hiking, fishing and iguana farm tours – all are offered at Big J's. Other tour agencies are Cahuita Tours and Adventures *(☎ 506/2755-0082, aguamor@racsa.co.cr)* and Turística Cahuita *(☎ 506/2755-0071, dltacb@racsa.co.cr)*.

Aviarios del Caribe *(☎ 506/8382-1335, www.ogphoto.com/aviarios, breakfast included, $$$)*, an hour south of Limón, is a renowned sloth sanctuary, wildlife rehabilitation center and nature reserve, about 10 km/.6 miles north of Cahuita. This riverside B&B is a birder's delight, and their canal canoe tours (US $30) into the surrounding Estrella River Delta Wildlife Refuge are recommended even if you're not staying here.

Sloth mother & baby (Kirk Hoessle)

◆ Places to Stay & Eat

Outside Cahuita, and up a mountainside, is Selva Bananito *(☎ 506/2253-8118, www.selvabananito.com, meals included,* $$$$), run by a brother-sister team, Jurgen and Sophia Stein, who converted their family farm bordering La Amistad International Park, into a nature lodge. It's an adventure to reach; we surprised them – and ourselves – by driving for an hour up 15 km/9.3 miles of rough logging roads, across two creeks and two rivers, far into the forest. You don't have to though; they'll pick you up in their huge four-wheel-drive vehicle. There's no electricity but the rustic cabins are comfy. Horseback ride, hike upstream to a waterfall and swimming hole, climb a huge Ceiba tree, camp overnight in the forest, birdwatch, or mountain bike.

Selva Bananito

Behind the church in tiny Penshurt (Km 35), Judith and Pierre Dubois run the fine little open-air Piedmont Restaurant *($)*. It offers tasty French cuisine, served in the open-air in family-style, next to Pierre Dubois' tropical orchid garden. They offer riverside camping spots, with shower and toilet, and a night tour to see and hear frogs.

In Cahuita itself, we liked the Caribbean-style four-room mansion, Kelly Creek Hotel *(☎ 506/2755-0007, www.hotelkellycreek.com, $$)*. Owned by a couple from Spain, the exotic all-wood building and small Iberian restaurant (an unforgettable *paella*) are located right at

the entrance to the park, downtown. Entrance to the beach opposite, just outside the park, is by donation. More secluded, right behind Kelly's, is Alby Lodge *(☎ 506/2755-0031, www.albylodge.com, $$)*. Austrian hostess, Yvonne, welcomes guests to her thatched-roof bungalows set around a lovely garden. Communal kitchen and hang out area; an excellent value. Out of town at Playa Negra is Cabinas Iguana *(☎ 506/2755-0005, www.cabinas-iguana.com, $)* on beautiful grounds. Waterfall pool. The enchanting American-owned El Encanto Bed & Breakfast (☎ *506/2755-0113, www.elencantobedandbreakfats.com, rooms, house, cable, breakfast included, $$*) offers comfortably serene accommodations, set in a beautiful tropical garden near the beach. Peace and quiet can be enhanced in the Japanese-style meditation room.

Cabinas Iguana

North of town again is the Atlántida Lodge *(☎ 506/2755-0115, www.atlantida.co.cr, jacuzzi, pool, $$)*, next to the soccer field, where pleasing bamboo bungalow rooms, opposite a good swimming part of Playa Negra, can be found on the lodges' lush garden grounds. Cool pool with a bar and an aromatic BBQ.

Pool at Atlántida Lodge

Another good deal is the luxury hotel in Cahuita, the Magellan Inn *(☎ 506/2755-0035, $$)*, an intimate inn on a rolling lawn, with nice pool and all the comforts of home. Their La Casa Creole Restaurant offers seafood, Creole, and international cuisine in candlelit ambiance. Two km/1.2 miles north of downtown, the Magellan is an oasis in paradise and is the class of Cahuita.

RUNDOWN STEW

You'll see signs in Cahuita and Puerto Viejo for "rondon" soup or stew. It is a dish ubiquitous in Caribbean cooking. This coconut-based concoction is made with whatever the cook could "run down" or, as locals say, "rondon."

Eat at Swiss-owned, Mexican-sounding El Cactus for Italian-style pizza. Go figure. The Sol y Mar Restaurant fills up if only for its location opposite the park entrance. We loved Miss Edith's and her coconut flavored, homemade Creole cuisine. It's a *de rigueur* stop for dinner or lunch at the north end of town. Tables are shared, so mingle, but better reserve in advance *(☎ 506/2755-0248)* as it's super popular lately. It's worth it if you like new tastes. A Québécois owns Cha-Cha-Cha, a good place for international cuisine when you've had your fill of coconut rice and beans.

Puerto Viejo

Half an hour south of Cahuita is Puerto Viejo, "Old Harbor," the most laid-back Caribbean beach town in Costa Rica. This lazy village, settled as a fishing center in the earliest part of the last century, didn't get electric until 1987 and only had three phones by October 1997. While surfers come December through March to challenge the six-meter/20-foot surf at Salsa Brava, "Angry Sauce," others come for the *laissez-faire* lifestyle and boutique accommodations along the ribbon of road that hugs the coast. They come for reggae nights at Stanford's, a run-down dance bar on the beach where candles illuminate tree stump tables on the sand and the smell of ganja hangs in the breeze.

The clock ticks slowly here, and things are never hurried. It's an easy blend of Afro-Caribbean culture, escapist North Americans, indigenous families, intense eco-tourists heading on to explore the in-

land forest reserves, beach-bums, pot heads, surfer dudes and travelers like us, here to absorb some sun and slow the pace of our lives down to simplicity.

SUPPORT MEETINGS

AA meetings are here held on Tuesdays and Saturdays at 4 pm at the PV Fellowship Church. An NA meeting is also held here on Thursday.

As you enter town, look for the grounded barge (now growing weeds) that was once a commercial venture to ship the beach's black volcanic sand. Be aware that the town's popularity has grown immensely in recent years and many hotels recommend reservations on weekends, holidays, and at times during the dry season. Others are first-come, first-serve.

AUTHOR TIP: On the Web, check out options at www.puertoviejo.net, www.greencoast.com or www.puertoviejaweb.com.

◆ Adventures

At the center of town is the headquarters for the Asociación Talamanqueña de Ecoturismo y Conservación, ATEC *(☎ 506/2750-0191, www.greencoast.com/atec.htm)*, across the street from Restaurant Tamara. Outside this alternative tourism's tiny office there's a bulletin board and local map. They have an Internet connection and information about various tours, projects, and sights. Their focus is on eco and cultural tourism. It's here you can arrange for local guides for the nearby Gandoca-Manzanillo Wildlife Refuge, rainforest hikes, or visits to the indigenous communities, such as the Bribri, banished to inland reserves, as well as short nature walks (recommended) or serious rainforest hikes, camping trips, plus they serve as facilitators for taking fishing, diving, and snorkeling trips. Geo-Expediciones *(US ☎ 800/343-6332, CR 506/2272-2024, www.geoexpeditions.com)*, at Almonds and Coral Lodge, offers kayaking and adventures, including an excursion to Bocas del Toro in Panama. In Manzanillo, divers and kayakers should head to Aquamor Talamanca Adventures *(☎ 506/2759-9612, www.greencoast.com/aquamor)*. In addition to those watersports, they also offer trips into the wildlife preserve.

You can do yoga at Samasati Nature Retreat *(US ☎ 800/563-9463, CR 506/2224-1870, www.samasati.com)*, about two km/1.25 miles north of town. The retreat has daily classes and meditations, or you can stay there. Ommmmmm. The "in" place to watch the sunset (which way is west?) is the Red Stripe bar near the bus station. If you don't drink, try an ice cream from the place next door.

◆ Places to Eat

DINING PRICE CHART	
Prices based on a typical entrée, per person, not including beverage.	
$	under $5
$$	$5 to $10
$$$	$11-$20
$$$$	over $20

In-town dining highlights include Restaurant Tamara, the biggest place downtown, serving Tico food and owned by a local family. Here, the fish is fresh and the *casados* are inexpensive. Upstairs is a breezy evening bar. You'll find a number of local women have set up dining areas on their porch or house and offer Caribbean cuisine such as the ubiquitous Rondon stew (see page 358). They stick up a little sign and name their establishments with their first names, a folksy tradition that guarantees informal, home-style dining. Miss Sam serves a traditional Caribbean lunch, plus hot jonney cakes (called "Johnny" in the Caribbean) every day at 6 pm, except Sunday. Equally tasty is the food at a little restaurant across the street called Lidia's Place, which also features local home-cooked Caribbean cuisine in an open-air dining area.

Hotel Pizote *(☎ 506/2750-0088, $$)*, just before the bridge into town, has a good restaurant and is the most traditional cabin hotel in town. And for seafood we recommend the Mediterranean-style Marisqueria Oro *($$)*, near the soccer field. Vegetarians can try The Place *($-$$)*, around the corner from the bus station. It's closed Thursdays. Just for the hot weather they serve a hot curry. We liked Café Rico for breakfast.

Our favorite PV eateries are side by side, opposite the ATEC office. Chile Rojo, or The Red Chile, features a very tasty large Thai/veggie menu in its tiny storefront restaurant. Since it only has a few tables, this place fills up and stays filled for dinner. Try and get a table under a fan. Their much larger next-door neighbor is Café Viejo, a delightful Italian restaurant run by three brothers from the Rimimi in the old country. Chef, Maurico, and his brothers, Marco and Mimi, have created a wonderful candle-lit ambiance in their semi-enclosed dining room, with romantic music, soft lighting and sheer curtains that flow in the breeze. Meals are expensive, but excellent.

Pizza and more can be had at the popular Pizzeria Rusticone, around the corner, one block. And check out Max's if you get down to the great beach at Manzanillo. Cool off when it gets hot with a cold

"Super 12," a soda made in Limón, at El Buen Precio, supermarket, near the sunken barge.

◆ Places to Stay

In Town

Find hotels in the town or one of the many down the various beaches to Manzanillo, at the end of the road.

In town, our all time favorite is Casa Verde Lodge (☎ *506/2750-0015, www.cabinascasaverde.com, pool, breakfast included, $$*), a block off the main drag. Rene and Carolina have created a magic tropical garden in which they built 16 clean and welcoming rooms, many with private bathrooms, in Caribbean wooden cabinas. In 2005 they finished their long-anticipated swimming pool, a deep, cool pool accented by faux rocks with a mini-waterfall. Indulge yourself in simple comforts, but book ahead; their high season is December through May, but also July and August. Spotlessly clean.

We also like Cabinas Tropical (☎ *506/2750- 0283, www.cabinastropical.com, 5 double, 2 two triple rooms, $*) owned by tropical botanist, Rolf Blanke. This small, cute and very clean hotel has tiled bathrooms and individual garden patios. Rolf offers personal custom tours with his naturalist's knowledge. Uphill from the soccer field is Cashew Hill *(☎ 506/2750-0256, www.cashewhilllodge.co.cr, $)*, with cooler climes and welcoming rooms featuring ocean views. Private or shared baths and kitchens. Two acres of woods to explore; muddy in the rainy season.

Cabinas Tropical

Before town are the Chimuri Beach Cottages (☎ *506/2750-0119, www.greencoast.com/chimuri.htm, $-$$*) on the palm-fringed black-sand beach. Take the left turn near the Pulperia Violeta, one km before you reach Puerto Viejo, for these three Victorian Caribbean beachside rustic cottages. Mauricio Salazar, one of the area's

more experienced nature guides, will take you on hikes into the Kekoldi Indigenous Reserve (US $25 per person) or on birding tours in a private nature reserve. He's associated with the Chimuri Nature Lodge.

Beach Cottage #2, Chimuri Beach

Playas Cocles, Chiquita, Uva & Manzanillo

We have lumped together the white-sand beaches south from Puerto Viejo – Playas Cocles, Chiquita, Punta Uva and Manzanillo – as they are only 10-20 minutes down the road. A shuttle bus plods the route, but don't hold your breath. The pretty Manzanillo beach is one of the most deserted.

Almonds & Corals

Farthest from town, but one of the most fascinating options, is Almonds and Corals (Almendros y Corales) Tent Lodge Camp *(Playa Mazanillo, ☎ 506/2272-2024, www.almondsandcorals.com, $$-$$$)*, which offers a unique jungle hotel experience. Private bungalows are actually huge tent houses with screened walls, all set on wooden platforms above the forest floor. They are connected to other buildings and the beach by raised wooden walkways. Inside each one, a second tent contains beds, a fan, hammocks and, behind curtain number two, the bathroom and shower stall. Not exactly roughing it, but more in tune with its surroundings than an air-conditioned room.

Aguas Claras Cottages *(Playa Chiquita, ☎ 506/2750-0131, www.aguasclaras-cr.com, $$)* is a secret hideaway; we really don't want too many people to know about it. Imagine 19th-century mini-

Victorian seaside villas – complete with gingerbread trim and painted in Caribbean colors – with open-air, screened kitchenettes and sitting areas. Now put them behind a bit of primary forest from a fabulous little bit of beach, right in the middle of a gorgeous garden divided by hibiscus bushes. Welcome to "Clear Waters."

HOTEL PRICE CHART	
Prices are per-night for two people, not including 16% tax	
$	$21-$40
$$	$41-$80
$$$	$81-$125
$$$$	$126-$200
$$$$$	over $200

Designed like a primitive indigenous village, Shawandha Lodge *(Playa Chiquita, ☎ 506/2750-0018, www.shawandhalodge.com, breakfast included, $$$)* features gorgeous thatched-roof wood bungalows nestled among huge Ceiba trees and tropical flowers. Refinement and comfort in a neo-primitive style. Tile bathrooms and ceramics designed by French artist Filou Pascal. Lots of primitive artwork; the Bribri never had it so good as Shawandha's creature comforts. Open-air French gourmet restaurant.

Shawandha Lodge

Cariblue Bungalows *(Playa Cocles, ☎ 506/2750-0035, www.cariblue.com, breakfast included, $$$)* are owned by a congenial Italian couple, Leonardo Preseglio and Sandra Zerneri. These spacious hardwood bungalows are nestled in the tropical jungle across from a blue flag beach. Wooden porches have Yucatecan hammocks for lazy afternoons in this quiet, serene environment. Have dinner in their candlelit *rancho* restaurant or hang out and watch big-screen satellite TV in the open-air lounge and bar. Reservations recommended.

Miraflores Lodge (*Playa Chiquita, ☎ 506/2750-0038, www.mirafloreslodge.com, café restaurant, $$*) is an inviting forest lodge, set back about 500 meters/1600 feet from the beautiful Chiquita beach. Bilingual owner Pamela Carpenter built her lodge inspired by architecture of the local indigenous peoples, and she indulged in her

love of flowers to landscape the surrounding property. The accommodations at Miraflores are known as Garden rooms on the first level and Lodge rooms on the upper.

The owner of the small La Costa de Papito bungalow hotel *(Playa Cocles, ☎ 506/2750-0704, www.lacostadepapito.com, $$)* escaped from New York and brought his 13 years experience at the Carlton Arms Hotel to Costa Rica. The African-looking bungalows are beautifully designed with polished wood and tiled showers. The garden grounds have the same attention to detail. Breakfast ordered the night before (US $5), will be delivered to your room. This is a very interesting and pleasing place to stay.

La Costa de Papito

◆ Nightlife

Nightspots are somewhat limited to Stanford's, a local bar/restaurant/dance hall on the beach (get a buzz), the bar upstairs above Tamara's, Johnny's Place, a tavern facing the beach in the central part of town, or Elena's Bar & Restaurant, down the road at Playa Chiquita. All the way in Playa Manzanillo, you can hang around upstairs at Max's, a local hangout on the beach at the end of the road, which also has a good reputation as a restaurant.

Gandoca-Manzanillo Wildlife Refuge

The sleepy village of Manzanillo, named after the towering Manzanillo tree that used to dominate its center, lies on the edge of the Gandoca-Manzanillo Wildlife Refuge, a 9,500-hectare park between the mouths of the Cocles and Sixaola rivers. The refuge protects swamps, lagoons, flooded forests and the only remaining

red mangrove, or Cativo (*Prioria copaifera*), forests in Costa Rica. Its marine element is meant to provide a refuge for endangered manatees (*Trichechus manatus*), plus green turtles (*Chelonia mydas*), hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*) and *baula*, or leatherback, turtles (*Dermochelys coriacea*).

The Gandoca section is accessed from the road to Sixaola. There are guided tours during leatherback turtle nesting season between February and May. Along the edge of the reserve are truly one-of-a-kind accommodations: the Costa Rica Treehouse Lodge (*Punta Uva, ☎ 506/2750-0706, www.costaricatreehouse.com, $$*). Yes, we're talking about a real treehouse, built around a tall and sturdy Sangrillo tree, located on 10 acres of oceanfront property in front of the Iguana Verde Foundation (www.iguanaverde.com). The foundation is trying to save the endangered green iguana by working with and educating local children. Adopt an iguana while you're there and sleep well in the heights of arboreal comfort. The treehouse, built on two levels connected by swaying steel cable bridges, boasts two large rooms and can sleep up to five people. The Beach House, overlooking the Caribbean, features open living space and sleeps up to four. Reserve well in advance.

Costa Rica Treehouse Lodge

The Frontier – Panama

You're only a few kilometers from Panama. If you'd like to visit, follow the road through Bribri, a town in the midst of banana plantations – not an indigenous town of the Bribri Indians, although some live there. There is little reason to stop here, except for perhaps the bank or post office. On the frontier with Guabito, Panama, is the poor Costa Rican town of Sixaola, a minor border crossing.

Bocas del Toro

For a two- or three-day trip into Panama, the Bocas del Toro, an island village in an archipelago of islands, is a good choice. Bring dollars, not *colones*, to Panama. To get to Bocas, cross the border at Sixaola and continue to Changuinola (15 minutes, US $6 by taxi). Take a taxi or bus (US $2) to the nearby banana port of Almirante and catch a water taxi (US $8) to Bocas. When you get there you'll find a quaint Caribbean village on the order of Puerto Viejo, only not as well-to-do. If your visa is expiring, hang out here for three days and return for a new stamp at the border. Basitimientos National Marine Park is on another of the archipelago's nearby islands.

For a cultural eco-adventure in the interior of Panama's rainforest, look to Wekso Ecolodge *(☎ 507/620-0192, www.ecotour.org/destinations/wekso.htm, $$)*, set deep in the jungle among the Naso/Teribe indigenous peoples. What remains of the Naso community consists of 11 villages stretched along the Teribe River, into La Amistad Park. The wooden communal lodge is up on stilts above a cleared meadow in the tropical forest. A true eco-cultural adventure in rustic but comfortable lodgings. Follow the directions to Changuinola and take a taxi (US $8) or bus ($1) to El Silencio. From there, it's a hour upstream to Wekso, an ODESEN (Naso Organization for Sustainable Ecotourism Development) sponsored lodge. Arrange for a boat with them in advance, or wait for the commuter boat (US $8).

The South Pacific
to Cartago
San Marcos
Santa Maria
Chirripó National Park
San Gerado
Quepos
San Isidro
Rivas
Inter-American Hwy
La Amistad International Park
PANAMA
Dominical
Dúrika Biological Reserve
Uvita
Buenos Aires
Boruca Indian Reserve
N
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Palmar Norte
PUNTARENAS
Sierpe
San Vito
Wilson Botanical Gardens
Caño Island Biological Reserve
Marenco Biological Station
Drake
Golfito Nat'l Wildlife Refuge
Neily
Rincón
Golfito
Los Patos
Paso Canoas
San Pedrillo
Zancudo
Sirena
Puerto Jiménez
Golfo Dulce
Corcovado National Park
Carate
Pavones
Cabo Matapalo
50 KM
30 MILES
Pacific Ocean
Punta Burica
Isla Burica
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Zona Sur, the South Pacific

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The southwestern corner of Costa Rica is the least populated, and by far the least visited, area of the country. It borders a largely unpopulated part of Panama; consequently, large sections of primary rainforest have been spared from development. In a cooperative effort with neighboring Panama, a huge chunk of Costa Rica and a part of Panama were set aside as La Amistad International Park, a mountainous wooded area that straddles the Continental Divide. Contiguous with Chirripó, Hitoy Cerere, Tapantí-Macizo de la Muerte, and other parks, the total area under an umbrella of protection is 340,000 hectares/839,800 acres.

The pride of Tico conservationists is Corcovado National Park, a huge primary and secondary park on the Osa Peninsula. It's been a hotbed of contention between gold miners and loggers, who wish to exploit its natural resources, and ecologists trying to protect the incredible bio-diversity. Into the mix are the eco-tourism folks who wish to forge a balance.

It's a wild country in parts – with deluges of warm rain. Dress appropriately. The South Pacific region boasts wonderful scenery, fabulous beaches, dramatic mountains, endless rainforests, big tube waves, white sand beaches, dark green hillsides of coffee, plus a dolphin and whale playground – with tons of budget hotels as well as remote luxury eco-lodges to enjoy.

Whale watching season is best from August through November, when whales pass in migration, breed and frolic in Golfo Dulce. Many tours and hotels offer whale watch cruises. Off the coast from

Drake Bay is the Isla del Caño Biological Reserve, a popular, year-round day-trip to explore and hike, visit the cemetery of a prehistoric peoples, or snorkel and dive in the clear waters. Difficult to reach and far from San José, the south of Costa Rica is a very special, out-of-the-ordinary vacation. You can go with a wide range of package stays that include transportation from San José, or just wander around on your own.

Osa Peninsula

Osa Peninsula

Once isolated from the mainstream of tourism – and Costa Rica in general – the beautiful Osa Peninsula is now drawing eco- and adventure tourists in increasing numbers. Stunning Drake Bay and its northern section of pristine Corcovado National Park can be reached by charter plane from Pavas, San José, or by an 1½-hour boat trip from the Sierpe River. The small airport at Puerto Jiménez,

the peninsula's most important town, has made it a lot easier to access the beach towns and southern Corcovado Park. Bordered to the west by the warm Pacific Ocean and the east by a marine paradise, the Golfo Dulce (Sweet Gulf) is where playful dolphins follow your launch and huge humpback whales come to breed. Osa is a memorable eco-adventure, however, it is not for everyone – the environment can be physically demanding and requires some strenuous exertion.

To get to Drake Bay, take a boat from Sierpe, a lazy little town along the river of the same name that marks the beginning of 14,555 hectares/35,950 acres of mangrove forest. The remote area, pronounced "DRA-Kay," can also be reached by a four-wheel-drive, pot-holed dirt road, or by air with Nature Air *(☎ 506/2220-3054)* and SANSA *(☎ 506/2221-9414)*. If you stay overnight in Sierpe, 30 minutes off the Inter-American Highway, you may find it has a lot more to offer than simply an overnight stop. The Valle de Diquis area around Sierpe contains many mysterious stone spheres (*esferas de piedra*) made by unknown pre-Columbian peoples. You can easily visit Isla Violin, an important archeological site at the mouth of the river, just north of Drake Bay. Years ago, large nuggets found on this island started a "Gold Rush" that is still ongoing on the Osa Peninsula. The little town is a convenient mainland base for those who don't want the expense of Drake's more remote resorts but still want to see the area's sights.

? DID YOU KNOW? Osa hosts at least 50% of the species found in Costa Rica and 2.5% of all species worldwide. Help save them at www.osacampaign.org.

◆ Places to Stay

Two km/1.25 miles before Sierpe is the Eco-Manglares Lodge *(☎ 506/2786-7414, restaurant, $$)* a bungalow hotel with rustic and appealing wood rooms. The lodge offers day tours of Drake, Corcovado Park and Caño Island, plus fishing trips and mangrove estuary boat rides. North Americans run Estero Azul Lodge *(☎ 506/2786-7422, www.samplecostarica.com, res-*

Estero Azul Lodge

taurant, $$$), on the banks of the river, just past Eco-Manglares. It has individual bungalows on beautiful grounds. Tours are offered by experienced guides.

In Sierpe town, Hotel Pargo Rojo *(☎ 506/2786-6092, $$)* s a best bet if you're here on the cheap or just for a night waiting to go to Drake Bay. There's an excellent Tico restaurant. Tours available in their own boats (they'll watch your car for the day). Across the bridge is the intimate Veragua River House *(☎ 506/2786-7460, restaurant, breakfast, $$)*, recently remodeled by its Italian owners, Ilana and Benedetto. Delightful Ilang Ilang flowers fill spacious grounds. Bungalows are simple and charming. The restaurant serves Italian food.

HOTEL PRICE CHART	
Prices are per-night for two people, not including 16% tax	
$	$21-$40
$$	$41-$80
$$$	$81-$125
$$$$	$126-$200
$$$$$	over $200

Accessible only by boat is Mike Stiles' Río Sierpe Lodge *(☎ 506/2225-8553, www.riosierpelodge.com, restaurant, $$)* catering to fishermen, divers and eco-adventurers. It's near Isla Violin at the mouth of the Sierpe River, just north of Drake. Day tours or package rates for multiple nights.

◆ Drake Bay

Drake Bay is one of the most stunningly beautiful areas of Osa and a gateway way into Corcovado park, also a base to explore Caño Island. Costa Ricans pronounce it "DRAH-kay," but it's named after the British pirate, Sir Francis Drake, who visited in 1579 and allegedly buried treasure somewhere on its beaches. Don't bother digging for it; the richness of the location is more than enough.

To get to the northern part of the peninsula, the most convenient way is by a daily, 45-minute charter flight from Pavas airport, near San José, to the tiny Drake Bay airport (contact Drake Bay Wilderness Resort, below). But many guests come by boat from Sierpe near Palmar Norte, through the trackless mangrove swamps along the river. This area contains a wonderful wealth of birds and swampland wildlife. Most of Drake's accommodations are all-inclusive lodges, spread out on several kilometers of beach so it would be a mistake to go without reservations, unless you're traveling lightly to

the little village of Drake. Since you're reserving, the lodges will arrange your transportation, which for some lodges means wading ashore or fording a stream. Because the Osa Peninsula and inland coast get a tremendous amount of precipitation, some of more remote hotels close during the rainy season when there are insufficient tourists to make them profitable. You can help support whale and dolphin marine research at Drake Bay by joining www.vidamarina.org. They offer teen learning camps that are great fun

Places to Stay

Jinetes de Osa

In the village of Drake itself (it's official name is Agujitas), Jinetes de Osa *(US ☎ 866/466-5090, CR ☎ 506/2236-5637, www.soldeosa.com/jinetesdeosa/index.htm, closed September and October, full board*) is a cozy, nine-room lodge that faces a black beach. It specializes in PADI dive packages, regular "adventure" packages, or just spacious rooms, with meals, by the night. Dive packages for five nights are about US $750, adventure packages $650; rooms run US $80 per night, per person, with meals. Tours available. There are also Tico-style accommodations around. Our favorite was Cabinas Mirador Lodge *(US ☎ 877/769-8747, CR 506/2223-4060, www.mirador.co.cr, all-inclusive)*. Wade the river and scramble up the steep hill to their rustic cabins with dramatic bay views. A room and three meals a day (the owners are vegetarian, as is most of the food) is less than US $50 per person. They offer tours and hiking, plus covered camping spots available on the hill above (US $15 per person, with meals).

Cabinas Mirador Lodge

Aguila de Osa Inn

The Aguila de Osa Inn *(US ☎ 866/924-8452, CR 506/2296-2190, www.aguiladeosa.com, closed October, full board)* sits on a bluff overlooking the bay and the Agujitas River. It's the most luxurious place on Osa, with rooms high up the hill. The seafood and pasta restaurant is noteworthy, and the cabin rooms all feature hardwood floors, ceiling fans and lovely tiled bathrooms. Rooms start at US $260 per person, with meals and a tour (two night minumum). You can opt for one of their various package deals catering to horseback riders, divers, sport fishermen, nature lovers and more. Add about $250 for a round-trip flight from San José.

Drake Bay Wilderness Resort

On its own little peninsula at the head of the Agujitas River, Drake Bay Wilderness Resort *(☎ 506/2770-8012, www.drakebay.com, pool, free laundry, full board)* offers 20 attractive oceanside bungalows, or tenting platforms with beds and electricity. Many customers take advantage of the daily, 45-minute charter flight from San José. There are a ton of things to do here – snorkel, swim at the beach (a 15-minute walk away), languish in a natural rock pool, kayak or canoe the river, visit their iguana farm and butterfly garden, dine at the renowned restaurant, take a tour or simply hang out at the bar. A four-day package with two guided tours costs US $670 per person. New budget cabins cut $100 from that price.

Canadian-owned Cocalito Lodge *(Canada ☎ 519/782-3978, CR 506/2770-8209, www.costaricanet.net/cocalito, full board)* claims it's "living in harmony with nature." Well, there's plenty of nature around. The main lodge and rustic cabins face the best lazy surf

Cocalito Lodge

swimming beach on Drake Bay, and they have a private 45-acre reserve with its own small river. Cost is US $475 for three nights and two tours. Camping sites are offered.

The rustic accommodations of Proyecto Campanario Biological Reserve and Field Station *(☎ 506/2258-5778, www.campanario.org, all meals)* are within walking distance of the national park and a stone's throw from a lovely beach. They attract tourists who have a genuine interest in learning about the rainforest and the diverse ecology of Corcovado. It's a no-frills research field station with four private tent cabins or lodge with shared bath, dorm-style living. Director and educator Nancy Aitken offers a variety of enjoyable ecological field trips such as kayak trips in the mangroves, horseback riding, hiking, tide pool studies, snorkeling, scuba diving and Caño Island day tours. She also offers special Conservation Camps and Tropical Ecology courses. For US $430 you get an unforgettable three-night Eco-Camp with two tours included.

La Paloma Lodge *(☎ 506/2293-7502, www.lapalomalodge.com, restaurant, pool, $$$$)* stands guard over Drake Bay from its crow's nest location on the mountaintop. Gorgeous hardwood guest cabins face the cool and soothing westerly breeze and sunsets over Caño Island can be breathtaking. The best digs are the two-story cabins, but everything here is classy. Tours are offered, US $1000 for three nights, including land/water from San José.

La Paloma Lodge

Casa Corcovado *(US ☎ 888/896-6097, CR 506/2256-3181, www.casacorcovado.com, pool, closed Sept-Nov 15)* is the closest resort to the park itself. Caribbean designed, well-appointed private bungalows are scattered in a wooded area of their private reserve,

defining the best of "soft" adventure travel. This place was built by a naturalist for serious nature lovers. They offer tours, plus hiking to the park and waterfall, fine dining and a spring-fed pool. It is billed as a "Lost World" resort, but you might like to find it. Fishing and diving packages. A three-night package with air from San José and boat transfer is around US $1,500 per person, including tours and air from San José.

Casa Corcovado

◆ Isla Caño

Tiny Caño Island, whose entire 196 hectares/480 acres are a designated biological reserve, lies only 20 km (12 miles) off Drake Bay. It's covered by virgin and secondary tropical rainforests and has several hiking trails. It was once used by pre-historic Diquis people as a graveyard and repository for those fascinating stone balls. Although the graves have long been looted, the spherical stones remain and you can see them up close on your hike. Isla Caño also served as another pirate hide out and pigs left to forage by the buccaneers were finally exterminated in the 1970s.

Today, the island is a natural playground, with deliciously clear waters ideal for snorkeling and diving. All the lodges mentioned above run day tours to the island and, if you have the opportunity to go, it is a delightful day.

◆ Corcovado National Park

Olof Wessberg, the impetus behind the Cabo Blanco Absolute Reserve and an early backer of the national park system, went to the Osa Peninsula in 1975 to investigate the potential for a huge new park, "Corcovado." He was murdered there under mysterious circumstances while on a walk with his host's son. Local business interests, gold miners, loggers and squatters didn't want to see more

Corcovado National Park
N
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Aguijitas & Drake
Los Planes
San Pedrillo
Río Corcovado
La Palma
Los Patos
Laguna Corcovado
Pacific Ocean
Playa Corcovado
Río Sirena
Río Pavo
Río Sirena
Río Tigre
El Tigre
Río Claro
Sirena
Punta Salsipuedes
Playa Madrigal
La Leona
Corcovado Lodge
Carate and Puerto Jimenez
Hiking Trail
Information/restrooms/phone
Ranger station
Camping
Food
Lodging
NOT TO SCALE
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Scarlet macaws in Corcovado National Park

land taken off the market. Osa was a poor territory and many believed the government cared more for its wildlife than its people. But Wessberg's senseless murder only served to galvanize proponents of a new national park.

Despite its legal protection, gold miners used destructive water-wash methods to pan for gold, and illegal logging plagued the park enough to force it to close, in 1994 and 1995, so police could evict the trespassers. On the bright side, eco-tourism is bringing good money into local communities and people are realizing the benefits of the park in other ways. Former gold diggers, called *oreros*, know the forest very well

Corcovado National Park

and many now work as guides. See below to stay in a former gold miners' camp in the heart of the peninsula at a rural cooperative.

Corcovado is a very important park; The diversity of wildlife there is staggering. It has been called "the most biologically intense place on earth" by the National Geographic Society and boasts the densest population of jaguars, scarlet macaws and tapirs in Meso-America. There are many trails within the park, but the most efficient way to get from one place to another is to walk the long beach. Entry is traditionally made at one of three points: La Leona, Los Patos or San Pedrillo.

JUNGLE FEVER

Late in 2005, monkeys, birds and other animals began dying at such an alarming rate that Corcovado was closed for a week while blood samples were sent to a pathology lab in the US. Tight-lipped officials claim the animals starved, despite little indication of change in the climate or food chain. An unspecified virus or something man-made may have been the culprit but, as of press time, it's still hush-hush.

The Beachside La Leona research station, two km/1.25 miles from Carate, has the new Río Madrigal trail that starts at the station, ascends into the rainforest, and then follows the river back down again to the beach. To reach La Leona entrance, take the daily *colectivo* taxi that departs Puerto Jiménez in front of the Mini-Tigre every morning at 6 am, except Sunday.

Silky anteater (Iztaru Spanish Academy)

Between Corcovado Park and the Golfo Dulce Forest Reserve is the Guaymí indigenous reserve, officially called the Alto Laguna Reserve. Located in the foothills of the highest point in Osa (750 meters/2,467 feet), its upper reaches are within a rich cloud forest. The Ngöbe (Guaymí) peo-

Coral snake (Iztaru Spanish Academy)

ple have lived here for centuries. In an effort to improve their lives, the 22 families of the reserve have built a palenque-style Ecoturistic Lodge Ngöbe, where tourists are invited to observe and learn traditional handicrafts and lifestyle. A visit here offers a view of Costa Rica only a handful of tourists have ever seen. Book through Galería Namu in San José *(☎ 506/2256-3412, www.galerianamu.com, see page 98).*

Two km/1.25 miles outside the Los Patos park entrance is Albergue Cerro de Oro *(☎ 506/2290-8646, www.turismoruralcr.com, $$),* a rustic lodge run by a local community of former gold miners. The eight families involved will show you their medicinal plant garden and offer hikes and birdwatching tours of Corcovado. Also boat trips on the Rincón River, where you'll see the rusting abandoned gold-mining equipment. Another interesting rural eco-tourism destination on the edge of Corcovado is Tesoro Verde (*Agujitas village, 4 km/2.5 miles south of the beach, ☎ 506/2770-8209*), a small eco-lodge that owns 36 acres of protected forest with trails. Visits to these kinds of co-ops directly benefit local people and the environment.

Bosque del Río Tigre

Bosque del Río Tigre Sanctuary and Lodge *(US ☎ 888/875-9453, www.osaadventures.com, tour and food included, $$$)* is not a community project, but the work of two cheerful naturalists, Liz and Abraham Gallo. The Gallos built this attractive rustic lodge in the cooler foothills above Dos Brazos del Río Tigre, a half-hour outside Puerto Jiménez, close to the entrance to Corcovado. Their private

reserve overlooks the river and the atmosphere is very comfortable, natural and tranquil. Excellent value.

◆ Puerto Jiménez

Tiny, funky Puerto Jiménez, (PWERTO he-MEN-ez) is located on the southeast coast opposite Golfito and serves as the main town and gateway to the park and coastal villages of Cabo Matapalo and Carate. Most visitors come by way of the 50-minute scheduled flights from San José. The town has its own character and sense of humor (after you arrive in your puddle-jumper plane, notice the graveyard at the edge of the runway and smile). A good website for info is: www.soldeosa.com/puerto%20jimenez.htm.

Beach lovers push on from here to Cabo Matapalo or Playa Platanares, and beach-park people wind up in Carate (but not Kung Fu – ha!). If you get lucky panning for gold at any of the places you visit, please remember to send us our cut.

Tours & Adventures

For active tours and expeditions, look to Escondido Trex *(☎ 506/2735-5210, www.escondidotrex.com)*, who been in operation since 1992. They offer multi-day adventure packages, kayak trips, mountain biking, hikes with park guide, plus half- and full-day tours. They claim their "back door entrance" into Corcovado encounters more wildlife. Fancy a five-hour horseback and kayak day tour of the Preciosa-Platanares Wildlife Refuge, three km/1.9 miles outside Puerto Jiménez, with your own guide? Phone Lidiette or Magda *(☎ 506/735-5440)* or stop by the Osa Natural office. Osa Natural is a community-based agency that handles travel to Drake and can help with your arrangements almost anywhere.

Playa Platanares has good waves for boogie boards and body surfing (we're addicted) and May through November the local residents and businesses have a nest protection effort for four species of turtles. They released 15,000 baby turtles last year.

Places to Stay & Eat

If you get the munchies in town, we suggest you try the authentic Mexican food at Juanita's Bar & Grill, adjacent to CafeNet in the newly remodeled Epicenter. Born and raised in Monterrey, Mexico, Sanjuana cooks up fajitas, chimichangas, nachos and tequila

chicken; and then serves it with a choice of seven Mexican beers or Osa's only frozen fruit margaritas.

Near the airport and the beach is a charming little motel on four acres of woods and gardens. La Choza de Manglar (*fax 2506/2735-5002, www.manglares.com, restaurant, Internet, $$*). This is an artsy inn and restaurant, in a natural garden setting, that is a clear step above local motels and eateries. Tico and international menu.

Parrot Bay Village

Near Puerto Jiménez, the seaside cabinas at Agua Luna *(☎ 506/2735-5719, air, cable, restaurant, $$$)* are clean and modern. It has a rural setting, 30 minutes by foot, or 15 by car, from downtown. Good food. Parrot Bay Village *(US ☎ 866/551-2003, CR 506/2735-5180, www.parrotbayvillage.com, $$$)* is located on a tranquil beach 10 minutes outside Jiménez. Beautiful accommodations with kitchens are set on expansive garden grounds, and the American owners also run a fresh seafood restaurant on the premises. Sportfishing is a big draw.

In Puerto Jiménez there are a fair number of low-cost housing options; stop in at Osa Natural and ask for a current recommendation. Ask about Cabinas Marcelina, Hotel Bosquemar, Cabinas Iguana Iguana *(pool, restaurant)*, or Cabinas Puerto Jiménez (on the beach). Backpackers, try Pension Quintero or Cabinas Thompson (near the bus station).

A star on the Playa Platanares shore (which is an excellent swimming area and one of the best beaches on Osa), is Iguana Lodge *(☎ 506/8829-5865, www.iguanalodge.com, $$$)*. It has a big main lodge built in an indigenous style, and separate

Iguana Lodge

luxurious, African-style bungalows. Two stories, with a big covered porch, the bungalow rooms are romantic and delightful. Iguana's restaurant kitchen is well known for delicious dishes.

Pearl of the Osa

A short walk away is the same North American owners' some-what lower-cost alternative, The Pearl of the Osa *(☎ 506/2735-5205, www.thepearlofthe* osa.com, $$$), a lime-green, Caribbean-looking hotel with large rooms that face either the surf or the jungle. Both promise wonderful vacations on Osa's best beach. Club rooms boast loft ceilings and great bathrooms.

If you can handle the road to get there, head for Cabo Matapalo, where the forest comes right to the deserted beach. Surfers who come to ride its right break have newly discovered it. Inland, you'll find Brian Daily's fabulous little wilderness beach hotel, Encanta La Vida *(US ☎ 805/735-5678, CR ☎ 506/2735-5678, www.encantalavida.com, $$$$)*, with choice of three different lodgings. Tours and meals are included, but there's a two-night minimum. A venerable favorite.

Lapa Rios

With a dramatic view of the sea and a vision to protect the rainforest, Lapa Rios *(☎ 506/2735-5179, fax 2735-5130, www.laparios.com, full board)* is the most luxurious resort lodge on Osa. It was created to pamper guests in paradise – a paradise preserved through the income from the luxury hotel. Lapa Rios proves projects that appreciate natural resources are viable alternatives to those that deplete them. Miles of private trails in the 405-hectare/1,000-acre private primary rainforest reserve, with cool waterfalls and river pools, beckon adventuresome

travelers for the trip of a lifetime. Romantic, spacious, luxury polished-wood bungalows have fabulous views of the ocean, and the restaurant serves gourmet meals. Memorable honeymoons.

A fascinating alternative is El Remanso (☎ *506/2735-5569, fax 2735-5344, www.elremanso.com, $$$*), set on 140 acres of mountaintop primary rainforest. Two conservation activists, Joel Stewart and Belen Momene, took eight years to build their hotel and they've done an admirable job. They offer cabinas or a gorgeous new lodge, Casa Poniente, featuring covered terraces with beach and garden views. Each private cabin is surrounded by a running water moat, which keeps insects at bay.

Bosque del Cabo

High atop Cabo Matapalo, overlooking the Gulfo Dulce and Pacific Ocean, where lush jungle spills down the bluff to the sea, sits Bosque del Cabo Rainforest Lodge (☎ *506/2735-5206, www.bosquedelcabo.com, pool, restaurant, $$$*). Bosque features rental houses and private bungalows, all with porches that offer endlessly stunning views of the ocean. Solar-powered electric highlights the lodge's ecological efforts, which include more than 500 acres of private forest, full of birds and wildlife. This was the first lodge to open in this part of Osa, about halfway between Puerto Jimenéz and the park.

Carate is the last beach area before Corcovado, and the most popular entrance into the park. Its natural beauty is amazing. Jungle cascades down to the deserted black beach and scarlet macaws swoop from tree to tree. On the way here you'll pass Terrapin Lodge *(US & Canada ☎ 831/278-1003, CR 506/2735-5211, www.terrapinlodge.com, $$$),* a Tico-owned lodge built in early 2000. In a rustic style, the six cabins are made with warm woods and bamboo and have metal roofs. The price includes three meals. A taxi from Puerto Jimenéz costs about US $75 so look to share. The *colectivo* shuttle bus costs $10.

Nearer the entrance to the park, the Lookout Inn *(US ☎ 815/955-8783, CR 506/2735-5431, www.lookout-inn.com, pool, all meals,*

$$$$) is nestled on the side of a bluff overlooking the ocean and black sand beach. It offers the quaintness of a country B&B in the midst of a jungle environment. Very ecologically sensitive, this inn delivers both comfort and pleasurable ambiance.

Pool at Luna Lodge

Beautiful Luna Lodge *(US ☎ 888/409-8448, CR 506/8380-5036, www.lunalodge.com, meals included, $$$$)* sits on a mesa over the Carate River Valley in 24 hectares/60 acres of forest. Five secluded upscale bungalows with views are available, as are tent platforms ($$). Just outside the park entrance is the Corcovado Lodge Tent Camp *(☎ 506/2257-0766, www.costaricaexpeditions.com, meals included, $$)*, a Costa Rica Expeditions beachfront hotel that features luxurious tent cabins up on platforms. This experienced tour company delivers a truly unique and rewarding experience. Recommended.

Corcovado Lodge Tent Camp

Downtown Golfito

◆ Golfito

In 1938, the United Fruit Company carved the town of Golfito (goal-FEET-o) out of the rainforest on the edge of the Golfo Dulce to serve as a harbor to ship bananas from their extensive Zona Sur

Golfito Bay anchorage

plantations. Thousands came and settled the area for the work provided in the fields but, after a series of worker strikes among other problems, Chiquita Brands decided it wasn't worth it and pulled up stakes in 1984, leaving the local economy devastated.

Golfito has little to offer except the stunning jungle backdrop of the surrounding Golfito National Wildlife Reserve primary rainforest, plus easy access to the gulf. The waterfront is littered with rusting hulls and houses of the poor lean over the water on stilts like they do in Southeast Asia. But these days its eco and adventure tourism that is helping the area come back. Fifty minutes in the air, or five hours by TRACOPA bus (three runs daily from San José), Golfito's easy lifestyle and attraction for sport fishermen and eco-tourists will encourage more people to discover the Golfo Dulce's magnificent offerings.

Tours & Adventures

Buildings left by the banana company were given to the University of Costa Rica to establish a Tropical Studies Program, an offshoot of which is University Tours *(☎ 506/2775-1249).* Young university fac-

ulty, biologists and naturalists run specialized tours into the surrounding Golfito Rainforest. They offer a Tropical Nature Tour, Town and Jungle Tour, Banana Plantation Tour and a Mangrove Aquatic tour – all under two hours – plus a Jungle Hike and Butterfly Tour (three hours). A biologist will also escort a Wilson Botanical Garden Tour (4½ hours).

Besides natural wonders, this part of Costa Rica is where those mysterious round stone balls, made by the pre-Columbian Diquís people between AD 800 and 1500, are found. The smallest is about the size of a golf ball and the largest, called El Silencio, is over two meters/10 feet in diameter and weighs about 15 tons. These amazing spheres are almost perfectly round, quite a feat for "primitive" people. The community of Palmar Norte, about 31 miles north of Golfito, is hoping to open a Stonehenge-type park to display them. Let us know if it comes about.

Places to Stay & Eat

Try Hotel Las Gaviotas *(☎ 506/2775-0062, lasgaviotas@hotmail.com, restaurant, cable, pool, $-$$)*, which has a waterfront location, a good restaurant, tropical garden grounds, a long dock and air-conditioned rooms. This is a good base for fishing and tours. Across the street is Hotel El Gran Ceibo *(☎ 506/2775-0403, www.hotelelgranciebo.com, restaurant, cable, pool, air, $)*. It's clean and neat and also offers tours. We sat for hours at the bars between these two hotels when the heavens opened up one evening, lending new meaning to whiskey and water.

Hotel Las Gaviotas

◆ Golfo Dulce

The area north of Golfito has clean beaches and several remote jungle lodges scattered around the gulf. The closest beach to Golfito is

Playa Cacao, out at the edge of the protected inner harbor. It's a US $5 boat ride; ask at the dock. If you would like to stay awhile, you could do boat trip to Zancudo Beach or Casa Orquídeas gardens from here.

Casa Orquídeas is a strikingly landscaped private tropical garden on the gulf shore. All the surrounding lodges offer trips here for guided tours of the lovely botanical gardens. Tropical Costa Rica's tropical fruit is both delicious and different from what you may get on your supermarket shelves, and the ornamental plants, thought of as house plants in the US, grow huge here. This is the beginning of Parque Las Esquinas/Piedras Blancas, Costa Rica's newest national park. The Austrian Government bought a large portion of the rainforest around here and donated it to the Costa Rican Park service. Another gift to visitors is the Esquinas Rainforest Lodge *(☎ 506/2775-0901, www.esquinaslodge.com, pool, full board)*, a model in sustainable development where students from the University of Vienna do biological research. It features enchanting rooms with shady verandas, plus a clear-stream swimming pool nearby. Guided adventure tours available. About US $200 per person, meals included, for two nights. Profits benefit local communities. Reservations at ☎ *506/2775-0140.* Free airport pickup in Golfito.

Places to Stay & Eat

Golfo Dulce Lodge *(☎ 506/8821-5398, fax 2775-0573, www.golfodulcelodge.com, pool, restaurant, full board)* is a complex of intimate accommodations informally grouped as a tiny village on the edge of the rainforest, about 250 m/822 feet from the rocky gulf beach of Playa Josecito. It's a 30-minute boat ride from either Golfito or Puerto Jiménez and is surrounded by Piedras Blancas National Park. The property has over 300 hectares/741 acres of virgin rainforest where the German biological program Profelis, a wildlife rehabilitation center, re-introduced margays (*Leopardus weidii*) and ocelots (*Leopardus pardalis*). They also work with Zoo Ave on a long-

Golfo Dulce Lodge

term project to develop a local self-sustaining scarlet macaw population. These beautiful birds were once plentiful before being decimated by pesticides and poaching. The lodge has five detached bungalows with covered porches in the deluxe category; plus, there are three standard furnished rooms. The on-site restaurant at this Swiss-owned establishment serves delicious European fare with a tropical twist. Three-night minimum.

Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge *(US ☎ 866/504-8116, CR 506/2258-8250, www.nicuesalodge.com, $$$$)* is a tranquil eco-lodge on a165-acre private preserve accessible only by water ferry. Its four cabins and guesthouse offer canopied beds, ceiling fans, individual verandas with panoramic views, and private baths with hot water and open-air shower. Electricity is provided by solar energy. Yoga energy too.

Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge

South of Golfito, the Golfo Dulce opens to a Pacific coastline shared with Panama, where some very remote beach areas attract surfers from all over the world. If you're not a surfer, you can still enjoy the incredible beauty and laid-back sensibilities of these unspoiled beaches.

◆ Playa Zancudo

This black sand, "blue-flag" beach is long, flat and good for swimming. It lies 19 km/11.8 miles by *colectivo* boat, or 35 km/21 miles by bus on poor roads, south of Golfito. Although still a secret to most tourists, it's full of young people from Europe and North America. At Zancudo, beach location and reasonable prices aren't dichotomies.

Places to Stay & Eat

Latitude 8 Lodge *(☎ 506/2776-0168, www.latitude 8lodge.com, 2 cabins, charter trips offered, $$)* has two newly remodeled cabins

Latitude 8 Lodge

facing the Pacific Ocean and right on the beach. Fishing is what attracts folk here. Penn International fishing equipment or similar top-quality tackle is provided for all offshore charter fishing trips. Surfboards are available for rent and boogie boards are available on request. Something's fishy at Roy's Zancudo Lodge *(US ☎ 800/854-8791, CR ☎ 506/2776-0011, www.royszancudolodge.com, pool, air, restaurant, all meals)*, which holds over 50 world record catches. If you're a sport fisherman, or want to be one, ask them about their package tours. Multi-day packages begin at US $2,250 for three full days fishing, full room and board and bar, tackle, plus air transfer from San José.

Gringo-owned, Oasis Beach Club *(☎ 506/2776-0087, www.oasisonthebeach.com, restaurant, $$)* offers clean and neat cabin or a "villa" on the beach. Completely remodeled and upgraded in 2004. Popular bar and restaurant too. The owners were happy the Red Sox won the pennant in 2007. Cabinas Los Cocos *(☎ 506/2776-0012, www.loscocos.com, $$)* has four cool cabins with kitchenettes, two of which were once banana worker housing. The owners run Zancudo Boat Tours, so staying here is perfect for stay-and-play vacationers. Next door is Cabinas Sol y Mar *(☎ 506/2776-0014, www.zancudo.com, $)*, with five screened beachfront cabins and a large house. Breezy *rancho* restaurant draws lots of people.

Cabinas Los Cocos

◆ Pavones

Despite a good break near Zancudo, all the surfers boogie down to Pavones for its famous long break, especially in the green season

when it is at its zenith. The beach is a two-hour drive from Golfito by bus, less by boat. It's a destination that focuses on surfers. If you're not a surfer, it may not please you very much, although Punta Banco Reserve, six km/3.7 miles down the road, is a natural wonderland.

Casa Siempre Domingo

The B&B where it is always Sunday is Casa Siempre Domingo *(☎ 506/8820-4709, www.casa-domingo.com, including breakfast and dinner, $$)*, an airy ranch-style home with sweeping views. Constructed in 1995, accommodations include four large rooms each with private, modern baths and air conditioning. Intimate and secluded. We also fancied Cabinas La Ponderosa (*US ☎ 954/771-9166, CR 506/8824-4145, www.cabinaslaponderosa.com, air, meal option, $$-$$$*) with casual, comfortable wooden cabins. This is a pretty good bargain as the optional three meals a day are cooked to order for just $20 more per person. A house is also available for rent.

Learn the wonderful benefits of the ancient Chinese art of *tai chi* in a pristine tropical paradise oceanfront setting near Pavones. Dr. Bob offers personalized vacation packages, group retreats, natural healing vacations at the Chen Taiji Academy *(US ☎ 305/751-6221, http://taichivacations.com)*.

If you're looking for a jungle lodge experience in southern Costa Rica, you might choose the remote biological reserve and experimental fruit farm just south of Pavones, Tiskita Jungle Lodge *(☎ 506/2296-8125, fax 2296-8133, www.tiskita-lodge.co.cr, pool)*. Back in 1993 Peter Aspinall, an agronomist, and his family purchased 51 hectares/125 acres to

Tiskita Jungle Lodge

Tiskita Jungle Lodge

create an experimental fruit farm. Quality cabins make this a comfortable, not luxurious, jungle experience. Traditional Costa Rican hospitality mixed with a beautiful environment, ecological focus and the best of rainforest/beach combinations, make Tiskita a real pleasure. Bring your kids to an educational family eco-camp stay during the summer. Package prices – including meals, transportation from Jiménez or Golfito, and guided tours – run US $400 or so per person, per diem.

Panama or Bust

The Inter-American Highway bobs and weaves its way down the mountains on its way to Panama. These sections of high valleys contain several interesting attractions, although few tourists get down this way. To visit Native American reserves is an opportunity we appreciate, plus there's rich coffee in the Italian influenced San Vito town. Not to mention the largest park in Costa Rica – La Amistad – a park so vast it overflows into Panama.

◆ Parque Internacional La Amistad

La Amistad means "friendship," and it is one of the rare instances of international environmental cooperation in the world. Panama's Park Service protects and supervises 40,000 hectares/98,800 acres of Parque Internacional La Amistad's land. Not only does the park boast a tremendous biodiversity of plant and animal life in its 193,000 hectares/476,710 acres, it also hosts seven indigenous reservations within its expansive borders. In 1982, UNESCO granted it World Heritage Status.

If you're searching for the exotic wild animals such as tapirs, jaguars, ocelots, giant anteaters, quetzals or any of the many rare animals in Costa Rica, La Amistad is the place to go. Go, but go only with an experienced guide, as this is a trackless and unforgiving jun-

gle. There is little or no infrastructure for tourism. If you'd like to hike here, start at the main entrance, Altamira, about 30 km/18.6 miles northeast of San Vito, where guides are available and hotels are at hand.

For a more detailed view of this World Heritage Site, check out www.wcmc.org.uk/protected_areas/data/wh/talamanc.html.

◆ Boruca Country

The Boruca are one of Costa Rica's last indigenous peoples. Their small community, on a government reservation, is surprisingly accessible from the Inter-American Highway at the agricultural town of Buenos Aires. The area around Buenos Aires was largely deforested for pineapple plantations, and it's a major supplier of the country's tasty fruit. The indigenous Boruca village is 18 km/11 miles up in the mountains and can be reached by a daily bus from Buenos Aires.

Boruca mask (Namu Gallery)

The Boruca are known for their handicrafts. Women weave a special cotton cloth dyed with natural pigments, including one extracted from a rare, cliff-dwelling mollusk that excretes tiny amounts of a purple dye when in danger. Boruca men create intricate ceremonial masks from native wood and carve scenes into gourds. The village offers many great photo ops, and your purchases will support a culture struggling to survive. We were lucky to see the men perform the re-enactment of their own people's defeat at the hands of the Spanish conquistadors using a bullfight as an allegory. The Fiesta de los Diablitos features two young men in a burlap and wood bull costume (representing the Spanish) and several young men wearing burlap bags and masks

(representing the Boruca warriors). The combatants have a life-and-death struggle to the sound of flutes and drums. This is a remarkable New Year's tradition.

Please buy some of their beautiful handicrafts – perhaps from the co-op in the village of Rey Curré, along the highway, or one of the many hotels in the district that sell Boruca crafts. In addition, stop at the indigenous museum in Térraba, south of Buenos Aires.

Also near Buenos Aires is the Dúrika Biological Reserve *(☎ 506/2730-0657, www.durika.org)*, a private community-led effort to achieve agro-eco-cultural sustainability. The guides here can take you where no one else goes – through their biological reserve or to an even more remote indigenous village. Two other guided hikes lead to the Cerro Dúrika, a 3,280-meter peak, or take you on a fantastic cross-country hike from there across the mountains to the Atlantic coast. Talk about cross-country. Make advance reservations.

◆ San Vito

Refreshing cool mountain air and great views announce your arrival in San Vito, an area in the Coto Brus Valley where Italian immigrant farmers settled in the early 1950s. The region, 287 km/178 miles from San José, is very fertile and produces some of Costa Rica's finest coffee. Don't leave without drinking up and stocking up on the *granos de oro*. Alas, there are no fine Italian wines to be had. There is little Old World flavor in the buildings of San Vito, but plenty in the best Italian restaurant in town, Pizzeria and Restaurante Lilliana.

Most visitors come to San Vito for the Wilson Botanical Garden and Las Cruces Biological Station *(US☎ 919/684-5774, CR 506/2524-0607, www.ots.ac.cr)*. Overlooking a mid-elevation forest, the Wilson Botanical Garden and its peaceful, secluded and magnificently landscaped setting remains a near-secret paradise. In 1961, Robert and Catherine Wilson, owners of a tropical plant nursery in Florida, settled here. With the help of Roberto Burle-Marx, a renowned Brazilian landscape designer, they created gentle paths through their 10 hectares/25 acres of colorful gardens. Visitors now stay in a modern lodge with spacious guest rooms and private baths. They eat healthful international cuisine with a special emphasis on fruits and veggies. Wilson is owned and operated by the Organization for Tropical Studies, who also run La Selva and Palo Verde Biological Stations.

Fifty km/31 miles farther on is Ciudad Neily, an unremarkable town with good bus connections. What is remarkable, however, is the drive down from San Vito to Neily. On clear days the views are breathtaking. Make this run during the day (mornings are better) and you'll be impressed. Guaranteed.

If you're just passing through this last major town before Panama, don't miss Eurotica Hotel & Restaurant *(☎ 506/2783-5009, www.hoteleurotica.com, $)*, where Belgian-born Liliana and her Tico husband, Mauro, offer pleasant air-conditioned accommodations in their basic hotel on 10 hectares/24.7 acres of land. Stop in for lunch or dinner; their kitchen has an excellent reputation for Italian and Costa Rican food. Plus, they offer Belgian beer! Say *bonjour* for us.

The last stop on the border is Canoas, a somewhat seedy border town that attracts bargain shoppers looking for imported goods. Say goodnight, Costa Rica.

AUTHORS' FAREWELL

No matter where you go or what you do in Costa Rica, we hope you return with a suitcase full of fabulous memories. We've tried to organize and evaluate the many attractions in a way you'll find useful – and hope we've provided both seasoned and first-time adventurers with unique experiences in a magical destination you'll want to visit again and again. *Pura Vida.*

There's a whole world yet to be discovered,
not of mysterious unknown places
but of relationships among places.
A century ago, great explorers were busy
filling the blanks on the globe.
What we haven't filled in yet are the blanks
of knowledge about those places,
their peoples and environments, and how they fit together
– an even greater challenge.
~ Gilbert M. Grosvenor, National Geographic Society

Appendix

Useful Websites

◆ US Booking Agents

Any good US travel agent can make advance arrangements with a number of reputable tour wholesalers. Try one of these companies.

Holbrook Travel . . . . . www.holbrooktravel.com
Nature Tours Inc. . . . . www.naturetoursinc.com
Costa Rica Experts . . . . www.costaricaexperts.com
Costa Rica Connection . . . . . www.crconnect.com
Tropical Travel . . . . . www.tropicaltravel.com
Rico Tours . . . . . www.ricotours.com
Costa Rica Discover . . www.costaricadiscover.com

◆ General Information

There are many sites on Costa Rica to help your planning and research. Here are a handful we recommend.

www.costarica.tourism.co.cr – Costa Rica Chamber of Tourism.

http://costaricabureau.com – Costa Rica Tourism & Travel Bureau. Visit this site for all kinds of details about Costa Rica's offerings.

http://costarica.com – A good general site. Information offered includes real estate, weather, retirement, shopping, culture and news.

www.costaricahomepages.com – Find out what's happening all over the country.

www.amcostarica.com is a great news resource. Updated daily.

www.cocori.com. Offers "All the facts and fun of Costa Rica."

www.visitcostarica.com – The Costa Rica Tourism Board (ICT) provides general background information. Reach them by e-mail at tourism@tourism.co.cr.

www.nacion.co.cr – *La Nacion*, the country's leading newspaper, runs this site.

www.ticotimes.net – Run by the *Tico Times*, Costa Rica's English-language newspaper.

www.insidecostarica.com – A daily newsletter.

◆ For Volunteers

For volunteer information, check out www.globalvolunteers.org/cstrmain.htm or www.amerispan.com, which has everything from ecology to Habitat for Humanity programs.

◆ Lots of Links

Below are some interesting websites that offer hundreds of links to Costa Rica-related websites.

www.web-span.com/tropinet/. This site offers a plethora of links for flights, accommodations, tours, language schools and more.

www.gksoft.com/govt/en/cr.html. A comprehensive list of Costa Rican government agencies on the Web.

http://directory.centramerica.com/costarica_asp/main.asp. Directories for professionals and businesses in Costa Rica.

Rainy Day Reading

Rain is not unheard of in Costa Rica; you'll need a good book for rainy days. Some books from large presses are available outside the country, but books from smaller presses can often be bought only in Costa Rica. The books below are all English-language and worth looking for in San José bookstores.

◆ Nature

Ecotourism and Sustainable Development: Who Owns Paradise?, Martha Honey, Island Press. A good overview of the impact, rewards and problems associated with eco-tourism.

A Guide to the Birds of Costa Rica, Gary Stiles and Alexander Skutch, Cornell University Press. A birder's bible. Download a birding checklist, courtesy of Rara Avis, at www.interlog.com/~rainfrst/birds.html.

Travel & Site Guide to Birds of Costa Rica, Aaron Sekerak, Lone Pine Press. Who, what and where.

The Resplendent Quetzel, Michael & Patricia Fogden, 1996. Beautiful color photos of this sought-after mystical bird.

Green Republic: A Conservation History of Costa Rica, Sterling Evans, University of Texas, 1999. A insightful history about the conservation ethic.

Life Above the Jungle Floor, Don Perry, 1991. Groundbreaking insight into the biodiversity of the rainforest canopy. Out of print in the States.

Windward Road: Adventures of a Naturalist on Remote Caribbean Shores, Archie Carr, University of Florida Press. In print since its publication in 1956, the book is a fascinating chronicle of Dr. Carr's Caribbean expeditions following endangered sea turtles to Tortuguero.

Costa Rica Native Ornamental Plants, Barry Hammel, INBio Pocket Guides, 1999. It grows on you.

Costa Rica Mammals, Eduardo Carillo, INBio Pocket Guides, 1999. In living color.

◆ Living Large in Costa Rica

The New Golden Door to Retirement and Living in Costa Rica, Christopher Howard, Globe Pequot, 2000. Opens doors.

Official Guide to Living and Making Money in Costa Rica, Christine Pratt (*Tico Times* editor). She should know.

The Legal Guide to Costa Rica, Roger Petersen. Look for this in San José bookstores.

Choose Costa Rica for Retirement, John Howells, Costa Rica Books, 2000. In its fifth edition.

Ticos: Culture and Social Change in Costa Rica, Mavis, Richard & Karen Biesanz, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999. A complete social history of Costa Ricans and an unvarnished look at today's society.

You Can Drive to Costa Rica in 8 Days, Dawna Rae Wessler, Harmony Gardens Publishing, 2000. The intrepid author did this trip in her ancient VW bus. Amusing tips on how (or how not to) make the journey.

◆ Fiction

The Lonely Men's Island, José León Sánchez, translated by Michael Jensen, 1997. A novel portraying life in Costa Rica's notorious San Lucas island prison.

Tata Mundo, Fabián Dobles, translated by Joan Henry, 1998. Short stories.

Costa Rica: A Traveler's Literary Companion, edited/translated by Barbara Ras, Consortium Books, 1994. Twenty-six stories by 20 of Costa Rica's better-known authors reflect the culture by location.

Assault on Paradise: A Novel, Tatiana Lobo, 1998. This historical novel, winner of the 1995 Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz Prize, is set in the early 18th century. It uses its swashbuckling hero for an eloquent and moving indictment of the conquistadors and their bloodthirsty legacy.

Years Like Brief Days, Fabián Dobles, Dufour Editions, 1996. Not-so-nostalgic journey of an old Costa Rican man whose return to his village evokes childhood memories.

◆ Culinary Delights

Sabor!, Carlina Avila & Marilyn Root, 1997. A wonderful guide to tropical fruits and vegetables. Includes lots of regional recipes. Black-and-white illustrations.

My Kitchen, Nelly Urbina,1999. Simple recipes of typical meals.

Costa Rican Typical Foods, Carmen de Musmanni and Lupita Weiler, 1994. Sixty traditional meal recipes.

A Bite of Costa Rica, or *How We Costa Ricans Eat*, Oscar Chavarría, 1992. Traditional recipes.

Showtime

A handful of movies were made on location in Costa Rica. They include:

Corner of Paradise (1997), starring Penelope Cruz.

New Adventures of The Jungle Book (1998), starring Sean Price McConnell as Mowgli.

1492, Conquest of Paradise (1992), starring Gerard Depardieu with Sigourney Weaver portraying Queen Isabella of Spain.

Spy Kids 2 – The Island of Lost Dreams (2002), starring Antonio Banderas and Ricardo Montalban. Filmed on and around Lake Arenal.

Blue Butterfly (2002), starring William Hurt, is based on the life of Georges Broussard, founder of the Montreal Insectarium.

Jurassic Park. We're cheating a little on this one. The dinosaurs in the *Jurassic Park* movies were supposed to live on Costa Rica's Cocos Island. However, the movies were actually filmed in Hawaii.

Spanish Vocabulary

Days

domingo . . . . . Sunday
lunes . . . . . Monday
martes. . . . . Tuesday
miercoles. . . . . Wednesday
jueves . . . . . Thursday
viernes . . . . . Friday
sabado . . . . . Saturday

Months

enero . . . . . January
febrero . . . . . February
marzo . . . . . March
abril . . . . . April
mayo . . . . . May
junio . . . . . June
julio. . . . . July
agosto . . . . . August
septiembre . . . . . September
octubre . . . . . October
noviembre . . . . . November
diciembre. . . . . December

Numbers

uno . . . . . one
dos . . . . . two
tres . . . . . three
cuatro . . . . . four
cinco . . . . . five
seis. . . . . six
siete . . . . . seven
ocho . . . . . eight
nueve. . . . . nine
diez . . . . . ten
once. . . . . eleven
doce . . . . . twelve
trece . . . . . thirteen
catorce . . . . . fourteen
quince. . . . . fifteen

dieciséis	sixteen
diecisiete	seventeen
dieciocho	eighteen
diecinueve	nineteen
veinte	twenty
veintiuno	twenty-one
veintidós	twenty-two
treinta	thirty
cuarenta	forty
cincuenta	fifty
sesenta	sixty
setenta	seventy
ochenta	eighty
noventa	ninety
cienone	hundred
ciento uno	one hundred one
doscientos	two hundred
quinientos	five hundred
mil	one thousand
mil uno	one thousand one
mil dos	two thousand
un millón	one million
mil millones	one billion
primero	first
segundo	second
tercero	third
cuarto	fourth
quinto	fifth
sexto	sixth
séptimo	seventh
octavo	eighth
noveno	ninth
décimo	tenth
undécimo	eleventh
duodécimo	twelfth
último	last

Conversation

¿Como esta usted?	How are you?
¿Bien, gracias, y usted?	Well, thanks, and you?
Buenas dias	Good morning.
Buenas tardes	Good afternoon.
Buenas noches	Good evening/night.
Hasta la vista	See you again.

Hasta luego. . . . . .So long.
¡Buena suerte!. . . . . .Good luck!
Adios. . . . . .Goodbye.
Mucho gusto de conocerle. . . . . .Glad to meet you.
Felicidades. . . . . .Congratulations.
Muchas felicidades. . . . . .Happy birthday.
Feliz Navidad. . . . . .Merry Christmas.
Feliz Año Nuevo. . . . . .Happy New Year.
Gracias. . . . . .Thank you.
Por favor. . . . . .Please.
De nada/con mucho gusto. . . . . .You're welcome.
Perdoneme. . . . . .Pardon me.
¿Como se llama esto? . . . . . .What do you call this?
Lo siento. . . . . .I'm sorry.
Quisiera.... . . . . .I would like...
Adelante. . . . . .Come in.
Permitame presentarle.... . . . . .May I introduce...
¿Como se llamo usted?. . . . . .What is your name?
Me llamo... . . . . .My name is...
No se. . . . . .I don't know.
Tengo sed. . . . . .I am thirsty.
Tengo hambre. . . . . .I am hungry.
Soy norteamericano/a . . . . . .I am an American.
¿Donde puedo encontrar...? . . . . . .Where can I find...?
¿Que es esto? . . . . . .What is this?
¿Habla usted ingles? . . . . . .Do you speak English?
Le entiendo. . . . . .I understand you.
No entiendo. . . . . .I don't understand.
Hable mas despacio por favor. . . . . .Please speak more slowly.
Repita por favor. . . . . .Please repeat.

Time

¿Que hora es? . . . . . .What time is it?
Son las... . . . . .It is...
... cinco. . . . . five oíclock.
... ocho y diez. . . . . ten past eight.
... seis y cuarto. . . . . quarter past six.
... cinco y media. . . . . half past five.
... siete y menos cinco. . . . . five of seven.
antes de ayer. . . . . .the day before yesterday.
anoche. . . . . .yesterday evening.
esta mañana. . . . . .this morning.
a mediodia. . . . . .at noon.
en la noche. . . . . .in the evening.

de noche. . . . . .at night.
mañana en la mañana. . . . . .tomorrow morning.
mañana en la noche. . . . . .tomorrow evening.
pasado mañana. . . . . .the day after tomorrow.

Directions

¿En que direccion queda...? . . . . . In which direction is...?
Lleveme a... por favor. . . . . .Take me to... please.
Llevame alla ... por favor. . . . . .Take me there please.
¿Que lugar es este? . . . . . .What place is this?
¿Donde queda el pueblo? . . . . . .Where is the town?
¿Cual es el mejor camino para...? . . . . . Which is the best road to...?
Malécon . . . . . .Road by the sea.
De vuelta a la derecha. . . . . .Turn to the right.
De vuelta a la isquierda. . . . . .Turn to the left.
Siga derecho. . . . . .Go this way.
En esta dirección. . . . . .In this direction.
¿A que distancia estamos de...? . . . . . How far is it to...?
¿Es este el camino a...? . . . . . .Is this the road to...?
Es... . . . . .Is it...
¿... cerca? . . . . near?
¿... lejos? . . . . far?
¿... norte? . . . . north?
¿... sur? . . . . south?
¿... este? . . . . east?
¿... oeste? . . . . west?
Indiqueme por favor. . . . . .Please point.
Hagame favor de decirme donde esta... . . . . .Please direct me to...
... el telefono. . . . . the telephone.
... el bano. . . . . the bathroom.
... el correo. . . . . the post office.
... el banco. . . . . the bank.
... la comisaria. . . . . the police station.

Accommodations

Estoy buscando un hotel... . . . . I am looking for a hotel that's...
... bueno. . . . . good.
... barato. . . . . cheap.
... cercano. . . . . nearby.
... limpio. . . . . clean.
¿Dónde queda un buen hotel? . . . . . Where is a good hotel?
¿Hay habitaciones libres?. . . . . Do you have available rooms?

¿Dónde están los baños/servicios? . . . . . Where are the bathrooms?
Quisiera un... . . . . .I would like a...
... cuarto sencillo. . . . . single room.
... cuarto con baño. . . . . room with a bath.
... cuarto doble. . . . . double room.
¿Puedo verlo? . . . . . .May I see it?
¿Cuanto cuesta? . . . . . .What's the cost?
¡Es demasiado caro! . . . . . .It's too expensive!

Transportation Schedules & Fares

As mentioned earlier, you should steer clear of the area around the old Coca-Cola plant at night. If you'd rather avoid the area altogether, a new company called A Safe Passage can help you out. Offices are located in Alajuela, just a few minutes from the airport. Board their van here and you'll be delivered to the bus terminal. A Safe Passage will also purchase your tickets for you. Reach them at ☎ 506/2441-7837, rchoice@racsa.co.cr.

◆ General Transportation Contacts

Tobías Bolaños Airport at Pavas, San José, ☎ 506/2232-2820.

Juan Santamaría International Airport at Alajuela. Flight information, ☎ 506/2443-2622.

Daniel Oduber International Airport at Liberia. Administration, ☎ 506/2668-1180.

INTERBUS, ☎ 506/2283-5573, www.interbusonline.com, interbus@costaricapass.com.

FANTASY BUS, Gray Line, ☎ 506/2232-3681, www.graylinecostarica.com, ventas@graylinecostarica.com.

◆ Flights

Nature Air, ☎ 506/2220-3054, www.natureair.com. Daily departures from the Tobías Bolaños Airport, Pavas, San José to: Barra del Colorado, Drake Bay, Golfito, Liberia, Palmar Sur, Puerto Jiménez, Punta Islita, Quepos, Nosara, Tamarindo, Tambor, Tortuguero and Granada de Nicaragua.

SANSA, ☎ 506/2221-9414, www.flysansa.com. Daily departures from the Juan Santamaría International Airport, Alajuela to: Barra

del Colorado, Coto 47, Drake Bay, Golfito, Liberia, Nosra, Palmar Sur, Puerto Jiménez, Punta Islita, Quepos, Sámara, Tamarindo, Tambor and Tortuguero.

◆ Buses

METRO AREA BUS STOPS BY DESTINATION	
BUS	**STOPS AT:**
Alajuelita	Av 6-8, Calle 8; Av 6, Calle 10
Aserrí	Av 4-6, Calle 7
Barrio Mexico	Av 3, Calle 3
Barrio Luján	Av 2, Calle 5-7
Calle Blancos	Av 5, Calle 1-3
Coronado	Av 7, Calle 0
Curridabat	Av 6, Calle 3-5
Desamparados	Av 4, Calle 5-7
Guadalupe	Av 3, Calle 0
Hatillos	Av 2-6, Calle 6; Av 4, Calle 4-6
Moravia	Av 3, Calle 3-5
Paso Ancho	Av 4-6, Calle 2
Pavas	Av 1, Calle 16-20
Sabana Cementerio	Av 2, Calle 8-10
Sabana Estadio	Av 2, Calle 2-4
Sabanilla	Av 0-2, Calle 9
San Antonio-Escazú	Av 0-1, Calle 16
San Pedro	Av 0, Calle 9-11
Santa Ana	Av 1-3, Calle 16
Santo Domingo	Av 7-9, Calle 2
Tibás	Av 5-7, Calle 0-2
Tres Ríos	Av Ctrl.-2, Calle l 3
Zapote	Av 2-4, Calle 5

It's sad to offer the following advice as we are fans of public transport, but...

- Never leave luggage unattended, even on the bus.
- Be suspicious of people who offer to help. Paranoia anyone?
- Keep photocopies of passports and tickets separate from the originals.

- Always be alert and aware of your surroundings. Which means no booze for lunch.
- If you become lost, find a public place to ask for directions.
- In case of emergency, call 911.

To make a formal complaint for robbery or other criminal acts, call the Office for Victims of Crime, ☎ 506/2295-3271 or 295-3565. O.I.J Building. Av. 6, Calles 15 and 17, San José.

Services from San José to Surrounding Towns

San José to Aerial Tram: (see Guápiles)

San José to Alajuela & Juan Santamariá Airport: Every 10 minutes, 5 am to 10 pm, after 12 pm departures every 30 minutes. Av. 2, Calle 12-14. ☎ 506-449-5141, 30 min or 1+ hr. during rush hours.

San José to Atenas: Daily, 6 am to 10 pm. Every half-hour. Coca-Cola, Calle 16, Av. 1-3. Coopetransatenas, ☎ 506-446-5767, 1½ hrs.

San José to Braulio Carillo National Park: (see Guápiles)

San José to Bribrí: Daily at 6, 10, 13:30, 15:30. Calle Ctrl., Av. 13. Terminal del Caribe. ☎ 506-257-8129, Transportation Mepe, 5 hrs.

San José to Cahuita: Daily at 6, 10, 13:30, 15:30. Calle Ctrl., Av. 13. Terminal del Caribe, ☎ 506-257-8129. Transportation Mepe, 4 hrs. Return at 7:30, 9:30, 11:30, 16:30.

San José to Cañas & Upala: Daily at 8:30, 9:50 11:50, 13:40, 15:00, 16:45. Calle 14, Av.1-3. La Cañera, ☎ 506-222-3006, 669-0227, 3½ hrs. Return at 4, 5, 9, 14:15.

San José to Cartago: Every10 minutes from 5 am until 12 pm. Av. 4, Calle 9, picks people up at Calle 5, Av. 18 y 20. ☎ 506-233-5350, 50 mins.

San José to Ciudad Quesada: Every half-hour, 5 am to 7:30 pm. Calle 12, Av. 7-9. Autotransp. San José-San Carlos, ☎ 506-256-8914, 2½ hrs.

San José to Golfito: Daily at 7 am, 3 pm. Av. 5, Calles 14-16. Tracopa, ☎ 506-222-2666, 8 hrs. Return at 5 am, 13:30.

San José to Grecia: Every half-hour, 6 am to 10:10 pm. Av. 3, Calles 16-18. Tuan, ☎ 506-258-2004, 1½ hrs.

San José to Guápiles, Aerial Tram & Braulio Carillo: Every half-hour, 5:30 am to 10 pm. Calle 13, Av. Central. Empresarios Guapileños, ☎ 506-222-0610, 1½ hrs.

San José to Heredia: Every 10 minutes, 5 am to 11 pm. Calle 1, Av. 7-9, 30 mins.

San José to Irazú Volcano: Saturdays, Sundays, Holidays: 8 am. Av. 2, Calle 1-3 in front of Ministerio de Hacienda. ☎ 506-534-4125, 2 hrs. Return at 12:30.

San José to Jacó: Daily, 7:30, 10:30, 13:00, 15:30, 18:30. Coca-Cola, Av. 3, Calle 16. ☎ 506-223-1109, 2½ hrs.

San José to La Fortuna: Daily at 6:15, 8:40, 11:30. Calle 12, Av. 7-9. Autotransp. San José-San Carlos, ☎ 506-256-8914, 4½ hrs. Return at 12:30, 14:30.

San José to Liberia: Every half-hour, 6 am to 8 pm (express service at 3 pm, 5 pm). Calle 24, Av. 5-7. Pulmitan, ☎ 506-256-9552, 4 hrs.

San José to Limón: Daily every 45 min, 5 am to 7 pm. Caribeños, ☎ 506-222-0610. Calle Central, Av. 13, 2½ hrs.

San José to Los Chiles (Nicaragua Border): Daily, 5:30 am, 3:30 pm. Calle 12, Av. 7-9. Autotransp. San José- San Carlos, ☎ 506-256-8914, 5 hrs. Return at 5 am and 3 pm.

San José to Manuel Antonio (Direct): Daily at 6, 12:00, 18:00, 19:30, from Coca-Cola. Transportes Delio Morales, ☎ 506-223-5567, 3½ hrs. Return at 6, 9:30, 12:00, 17:00. (See also Quepos.)

San José to Monteverde: Daily at 6:30 am, 14:30. Calle 12, Av.7-9. Transmonteverde, ☎ 506-222-3854, 5 hrs. Return at 6:30, 14:30.

San José to Nicoya via Bridge: Daily at 6, 8, 10:30, 12:30, 14:00, 16:00, 18:30. Av. 5, Calles 14-16. Tracopa-Alfaro Bus, ☎ 506-222-2666, 5 hrs. Return at 3, 4:30, 5:00, 8:30, 9:00, 14:45, 17:00.

San José to Nosara (Direct): Daily at 6 am. Av. 5, Calles 14-16. Tracopa-Alfaro, ☎ 506-222-2666, 6 hrs. Return at noon.

San José to Paso Canoas (Panama Border): Daily at 5:00, 7:30, 11:00, 13:00, 16:30, 18:00 and one extra on Fridays 10 am. Av. 5, Calles 14-16. Tracopa, ☎ 506-222-2666, 6½ hrs. Return at 3:30, 8:30, 11:30, 15:00.

San José to Playas Flamingo, Conchal & Potrero: Daily at 8:00 and 15:00 via Liberia; 10:30, via the Bridge (☎ 506-654-4203). Calle 20, Av. 1-3. Tralapa Bus, ☎ 506-221-7202, 6 hrs.

San José to Playa Panamá: Daily at 15:00. Calle 20, Av. 1-3. Tralapa Bus, ☎ 506-221-7202, 680-0392, 5 hrs.

San José to Poas Volcano: Daily at 8:30. Av. 2, Calle 12-14. Tuasa Bus, ☎ 506-222-5325, 2 hrs. Return at 14:30.

San José to Puerto Jiménez: Daily 12 midnight. Calle 14, Av. 9-11. Transp. Blanco, ☎ 506-257-4121, 9 hrs. Return at 5 am.

San José to Puerto Viejo de Limón: Daily at 6:00, 10:00, 13:30, 15:30. Terminal del Caribe, Calle 13, Av. Central. Trans. Mepe, ☎ 506-257-8129, 5 hrs. Return at 7:00, 9:00, 11:00, 16:00.

San José to Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí: Daily at 6:30, 7:30, 10:00, 11:30, 13:30, 14:30, 15:30, 16:30, 18:00. Terminal del Caribe, Calle 13, Av. Central. ☎ 506-222-0610, 2 hrs. Return at 5:30, 7:00, 8:00, 11:00, 13:30, 15:00, 17:30.

San José to Puntarenas (Direct): Every half-hour, 6 am to 7 pm. Calle 16, Av. 12. Empresarios Unidos, ☎ 506-222-8231, 2 hrs. Returns from 4:15 to 7pm.

San José to Quepos y Manuel Antonio: Daily at 6:00*, 7:00, 10:00, 12:00*, 14:00, 16:00, 18:00*. Coca-Cola, Calle 16, Av. 3. Transp. Morales, ☎ 506-223-5567, 3½ hrs. Return at 5:00, 6:00*, 8:00, 9:30*, 12:00*, 14:00, 16:00, 17:00* (* direct).

San José to Sámara: Daily at 12:30. Av. 5, Calles 14-16. Tracopa-Alfaro Bus, ☎ 506-222-2666, 5 hrs.

San José to San Isidro del General: With Tracopa-Alfaro Bus, ☎ 506-222-2666, 3 hrs. Calles 14-16, Av. 5. Every half-hour, 5 am to 6 pm. Returns, 5:30 to 19:30. With Musoc Bus, ☎ 506-222-2422, 3 hrs. Calle Central, Av. 22-24. Daily at 05:30, 06:30, 07:30, 08:30, 09:30, 10:30, 11:30, 12:30, 13:30, 14:30, 15:30, 16:30, 17:30, 18:30. Return at 5:00, 05:30, 06:30, 07:30, 08:30, 09:30, 10:30, 11:30, 12:30, 13:30, 14:30, 15:30, 16:30, 17:30.

San José to Santa Cruz: With Tracopa-Alfaro Bus, ☎ 506-222-2666, 5 hrs. Av. 5, Calles 14-16. Daily at 06:30, 8:00, 10:00, 13:30, 15:00, 17:00. Return at 04:30, 05:00, 07:30, 09:30, 12:00, 14:30, 16:30. With Tralapa Bus, ☎ 506-221-7202, 5 hrs. Daily at 07:00, 10:00, 10:30, 13:00, 16:00 via Bridge.

San José to Sarchí: Daily at 12:15, 17:30, 18:10. Calle 18, Av. 5-7. Costado Oeste Abonos Agro, ☎ 506-258-2004, 1½ hrs. Return at 05:30, 06:00, 06:30.

San José to Siquirres: Every half-hour, 06:30-19:00. Calle 13, Av. 0. Transportes Caribeños, ☎ 506-222-0610, 1½ hrs. Returns, 5:30-19:00.

San José to Sixaola (Panama Border) via Cahuita & P.Viejo: Daily at 0:600, 10:00, 13:30, 15:30. Calle 13, Av. 0, 6 hrs. Transp. Mepe, ☎ 506-257-8129. Return at 05:00, 07:30, 09:30, 14:30.

San José to Tamarindo: Daily at 11:00, 15:30 via Liberia. Av. 5, Calle 14-16. Tracopa-Alfaro Bus, ☎ 506-222-2666, 5½ hrs. Return at 05:45.

San José to Tilarán: Daily at 07:30, 09:30, 12:45, 15:45, 18:30. Calle 14, Av. 9 -11. ☎ 506-222-3854, 4 hrs. Return at 04:45, 07:00, 09:30, 14:00, 17:00.

San José to Turrialba: Every half-hour, 05:15 to 19:00. Calle 13 Av. 6. Transtusa Bus, ☎ 506-222-4464, 1¾ hrs. Returns, 05:00 to 17:30.

San José to Zarcero: Daily, 05:00-19:30. Calle 12, Av. 7-9. Autotransp. San José-San Carlos, ☎ 506-256-8914, 1½ hrs. Returns, 05:00-18:00.

San José to Zoo Aves: Saturdays & Sundays, every half-hour 08:00-12:00. La Merced Church: Calle 14, Av. 4. Station Wagon Bus, ☎ 506-381-5450, 35 mins. Returns, 10:00-15:00.

Inter-City Connections

Drake from Sierpe (by boat): Transporte Colectivo, ☎ 506-786-7311, 1½ hrs. $15, minimum four passengers.

La Fortuna from Tilarán: Daily at 07:00, 12:00. Return at 08:00, 17:00. Tilarán downtown, 3½ hrs.

Mal País & Santa Teresa from Cóbano: Daily at 10:30, 14:30, 17:30. Return at 07:00, 11:30, 15:30. Terminal de Buses Cóbano, ☎ 506-200-0204, 45 mins.

Monteverde from Tilarán: Daily at 12:30. Tilarán downtown, 1¾ hrs.

Sarchí from Alajuela: Every half-hour, 05:00-22:00, same return times. Calle 8, Av. 0-1. ☎ 506-494-2139, 1½ hrs.

Zancudo from Golfito (by boat): Daily at 12:00; Return at 07:00.

For more inter-city bus service see www.costaricabybus.com/scheds.html.

International Service

San José to Bocas de Torro, Panama: 09:00 (part trip in boat). In front of Hotel Cocorí near Coca-Cola. Boca Toreños Bus, ☎ 506-385-7551, 9 hrs.

San José to David, Panama: Leaves 07:30, arrives 17:00. Av. 5, Calles 14-16. Tracopa, ☎ 506-222-2666. Return at 08:30.

San José to Panama City: With Panaline Bus, ☎ 506-256-8721, leaves 13:00, arrives 05:00 next day. Calle 16, Av. 3-5. With

Tica Bus, ☎ 506-221-8954, leaves 22:00, arrives 16:00 next day. Av. 4, Calles 9-11.

San José to Guatemala & Honduras: Tica Bus, ☎ 506-221-8954. Daily at 06:00, 07:30, 12:30. Av. 4, Calles 9-11. (Overnight in Managua, hotel not included; stops in San Pedro Sula y Tegucigalpa.)

San José to Managua (Nicaragua): With Tica Bus, ☎ 506-221-8954, 11 hrs. Daily at 06:00, 07:30, 12:30. Av. 4, Calles 9-11. With Transnica Bus, ☎ 506-223-4242, x 101, 11 hrs. Daily at 05:30, 09:00. Calle 22, Av. 3-5. Return at 07:00, 10:00. With Central Line, ☎ 506-248-9129. Daily at 05:00. Calle 12, Av. 7-9 (Estación de San Carlos). Return at 05:00.

San José to San Salvador, El Salvador: King Quality Bus, ☎ 506-221-3318, leaves 03:30, arrives 23:00. Calle 12, Av. 3-5 at the Upala bus stop. Breakfast & lunch included, stops in Managua y Tegucigalpa.

◆ Ferries

Puntarenas to Playa Naranjo: Daily at 06:00, 10:00, 14:20, 19:00. Dock Puntarenas. CONATRAMAR, 506-661-3834, 1 hr. Return at 07:30, 12:30, 17:00, 21:00.

Puntarenas to Paquera: Daily at 06:30, 10:30, 14:30, 18:30. Dock Puntarenas. Ferry Peninsular (ADIP), ☎ 506-641-0515. Return at 04:30, 08:30, 12:30, 16:30.

Puntarenas to Tambor: Daily at 08:30, 12:30, 16:30, 20:30. Dock Puntarenas. Ferry Peninsular (ADIP), 506-641-0515, 1¼ hrs. Return at 06:30, 10:30, 14:30, 18:30, 22:00. Note: This route not in service as of this writing; call for update.

Golfito to Puerto Jiménez: Daily at 11:30. Little Dock at Golfito, in Pueblo Civil. Sr. Chino Castro, 1½ hrs. Return 06:00.

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